THE GREAT COURSES®

Topic
History

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Modern History

The Search for a Meaningful Past:

Philosophies, Theories and Interpretations of Human History

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THE TEACHING COMPANY®

The Search for a Meaningful Past: Philosophies, Theories and Interpretations of Human History

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About this course

These lectures are part of the Superstar Teachers series. They are produced by The Teaching Company. These lectures are entitled The Search for a Meaningful Past, Philosophies, Theories, and Interpretations of Human History, Part 1.

The speaker is **Professor Darren Staloff** of the City College of the City University of New York. Professor Staloff received his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from Columbia University. Before joining the faculty at City College, Professor Staloff served for two years as a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Preface

History is often described as the study of the past, but this seemingly straightforward definition conceals a far more profound question: **what kind of thing is history?** Is it merely a chronological record of events, or does it possess an underlying structure? Does history reveal progress, decline, cycles, or no overarching pattern at all? Can we discover laws governing historical development in the same way that physics uncovers the laws of nature? Or is every historical event so unique that generalization is impossible? These questions have occupied philosophers, historians, theologians, sociologists, and political thinkers for centuries. *The Search for a Meaningful Past: Philosophies, Theories, and Interpretations of Human History* is devoted precisely to this enduring intellectual quest. Rather than recounting historical events, the course examines the great theories that attempt to explain what history itself means and how it ought to be understood.

Professor Darren Staloff approaches the subject from an interdisciplinary perspective. Although trained as a historian, he recognizes that history cannot be separated from philosophy, sociology, religion, political theory, anthropology, or literary criticism. The result is a survey that spans more than two centuries of Western thought while constantly comparing competing ways of interpreting humanity's collective past. The course follows the transformation of historical thinking from the Enlightenment through the twentieth century, introducing some of the most influential minds who attempted to discover order amid the apparent chaos of human affairs.

One of the course's greatest strengths is that it refuses to assume that our modern understanding of history is universal. Staloff

reminds us that the specifically Western conception of history as a linear progression from past to future is historically exceptional. Many civilizations instead conceived time as cyclical, repetitive, or mythic. Before asking whether history has meaning, therefore, we must first recognize that the very notion of "history" differs dramatically across cultures. This broader perspective prevents the student from unconsciously treating modern assumptions as timeless truths.

The lectures are organized as an intellectual journey rather than a simple chronology. Each major thinker addresses a central problem left unresolved by previous theories. Some emphasize divine providence, others reason, economics, ideas, culture, language, biology, or narrative itself. By the conclusion of the course, the student discovers that no single explanation has eliminated the need for the others. Instead, the history of historical thought becomes itself a demonstration of intellectual pluralism.

Lecture 1 introduces the fundamental issues. Staloff distinguishes history as the totality of past events from history as an academic discipline and explains why human beings constantly define themselves through narratives about their origins. He argues that historical consciousness pervades not only civilizations but individual identity, making the study of historical interpretation central to understanding ourselves.

Lecture 2 turns to the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade and his distinction between cyclical and linear conceptions of time. Ancient societies repeatedly reenacted primordial events through ritual, effectively abolishing historical uniqueness. Eliade contrasts this mythical worldview with the modern Western burden of historical consciousness, raising difficult questions about whether a secular conception of linear history can adequately explain suffering, catastrophe, and collective memory.

Lecture 3 examines Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, one of the earliest systematic attempts to formulate laws governing historical development. Vico argues that human societies pass through recurring stages while remaining fundamentally intelligible because human beings themselves created their institutions. The lecture explores the origins of modern historical philosophy during the Enlightenment and the first attempts to reconcile human freedom with historical regularity.

Lecture 4 considers Immanuel Kant's vision of historical progress. Although individual actions often appear chaotic, Kant proposes that humanity as a whole advances toward greater freedom through the hidden workings of reason. History becomes a rational process leading toward cosmopolitan civilization, introducing one of the Enlightenment's most influential ideas: progress as history's governing principle.

Lecture 5 explores Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's monumental philosophy of history. Hegel argues that history represents the progressive unfolding of human freedom through the dialectical development of Spirit. Nations become temporary vehicles for universal reason, each contributing to the gradual realization of liberty. Staloff also discusses the profound consequences of Hegel's historicism, including its tendency toward relativism and its political implications.

Lecture 6 presents Karl Marx's historical materialism. Rejecting Hegel's emphasis on ideas, Marx locates the engine of history within economic production and class struggle. Historical change arises from contradictions embedded within material conditions rather than abstract thought. Marx transforms historical philosophy into a theory of social revolution whose influence extended far beyond academic history into global politics.

Lecture 7 introduces Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of historical consciousness. Rather than celebrating historical knowledge, Nietzsche warns that excessive concern with the past may paralyze life itself. He distinguishes monumental, antiquarian, and critical history while arguing that historical study must ultimately serve human flourishing rather than become an end in itself. This lecture provides an important corrective to nineteenth-century confidence in historical progress.

Lecture 8 examines Max Weber's historical sociology, particularly his theory of legitimate domination. Weber broadens historical explanation beyond economics to encompass power in all its forms and develops his celebrated classification of legal, traditional, and charismatic authority. His insistence upon value-neutral scholarship and comparative historical analysis establishes many of the foundations of modern social science.

Lecture 9 shifts to Arnold Toynbee's ambitious study of civilizations. Rather than focusing upon individual nations, Toynbee investigates the rise and decline of entire civilizations through recurring patterns of challenge and response. His work represents one of the twentieth century's grandest attempts to revive large-scale historical interpretation after the decline of nineteenth-century philosophical systems.

Lecture 10 turns to R. G. Collingwood and twentieth-century neo-idealism. For Collingwood, history is fundamentally the reconstruction of thought. Historians seek not merely to describe external events but to recover the intentions and ideas motivating historical actors. Staloff traces the enduring influence of this approach upon modern historiography and intellectual history.

Lecture 11 considers Carl Hempel and logical positivism. Here history is examined through the lens of scientific explanation. Hempel argues that historical events should be explained by general laws

analogous to those employed in the natural sciences. The lecture explores both the attractions and limitations of applying scientific methodology to historical inquiry.

Lecture 12 examines Arthur Danto's philosophy of historical narration. Danto demonstrates that historical explanations inevitably depend upon narrative structures unavailable to those living through the events themselves. Historical meaning emerges retrospectively, illustrating the intimate relationship between storytelling and historical understanding.

Lecture 13 introduces Fernand Braudel and the Annales School. Rejecting event-centered history, Braudel emphasizes long-term social, economic, and geographical structures operating across centuries. His concept of the *longue durée* shifts attention from dramatic political events toward the slow rhythms that shape civilizations over extended periods.

Lecture 14 explores Hayden White and the linguistic turn. White argues that historical writing necessarily employs literary forms, rhetorical devices, and narrative conventions. Rather than simply discovering objective meanings in the past, historians actively construct interpretations through language itself. This provocative thesis reshaped debates over objectivity and historical truth.

Lecture 15 presents William McNeill's *Plagues and Peoples*, an influential example of naturalistic historical explanation. McNeill demonstrates how biological forces, especially infectious disease, have profoundly shaped political, military, and demographic history. Human history cannot be understood solely through ideas or institutions; ecological and epidemiological factors also exert enormous influence.

Finally, Lecture 16 addresses the heterogeneity of historical understanding. Having surveyed numerous competing theories, Staloff concludes that no single framework adequately explains every

dimension of the past. Different kinds of historical questions require different methods, different explanatory models, and different philosophical assumptions. Rather than offering a final synthesis, the course encourages intellectual humility while recognizing the extraordinary richness of historical inquiry.

Taken together, these sixteen lectures chart the evolution of modern historical thought itself. They reveal that debates about history are inseparable from broader questions concerning human nature, morality, politics, religion, economics, science, and language. Every philosophy of history carries assumptions about freedom, causation, knowledge, and the possibility of objective truth. To study historical theory is therefore to engage simultaneously with many of the central problems of philosophy.

The course also illustrates a recurring intellectual rhythm. Grand unified theories repeatedly emerge promising to explain all historical development. These are followed by critiques emphasizing complexity, contingency, interpretation, or plurality. Yet the desire for comprehensive explanation never disappears. Human beings continue to seek coherence within the immense diversity of past experience, even while recognizing that complete certainty remains elusive.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of *The Search for a Meaningful Past* is that it transforms history from a collection of facts into an ongoing conversation about meaning itself. The course does not merely ask what happened; it asks how we know what happened, why we think historical events matter, and whether history possesses any discernible direction. In doing so, it demonstrates that every generation rewrites history not simply because new evidence emerges, but because new questions arise.

Readers approaching the summaries that follow should therefore resist the temptation to search for a single "correct" philosophy of

history. The value of the course lies instead in exposing the assumptions behind competing perspectives and in cultivating the critical judgment necessary to evaluate them. Whether one ultimately finds greater insight in Eliade's cyclical time, Vico's historical laws, Kant's progress, Hegel's dialectic, Marx's materialism, Nietzsche's skepticism, Weber's sociology, Braudel's structures, White's narratives, or McNeill's biological naturalism, each contributes an indispensable piece to the larger puzzle.

The search for a meaningful past, then, is not simply an academic exercise. It is an inquiry into the foundations of human self-understanding. Every society, every nation, and every individual constructs narratives that explain where they came from and who they have become. By examining the greatest theories ever devised to interpret those narratives, this course invites us to reflect not only upon history itself, but upon the enduring human desire to discover meaning within time.

Lecture 1: Issues and Problems

I'd like to welcome you all to what I hope will be a very rewarding, if somewhat daunting and challenging, series of lectures.

Daunting and challenging because we're going to be looking at the scope of a progression of time and events which more than anything else tells us, as humans, as members of nations and societies, who we are and what we are about.

In this course, we're going to examine recent theories, interpretations, and philosophies of history in the West over the last approximately 250 years.

This is daunting not only because of the wealth of information, but additionally because of the scope and scale of the problem. It's something which often puts historians — of which I am one — off. Historians tend to think of the large-scale patterns of history as the bones of the skeleton of history, and they tend to think that what is best left to cadavers is the interesting part — the meat, the flesh, the details. For that reason, historians tend to pride themselves on ignoring large-scale historical sweeps, theories, and interpretations, and instead examine much more precise, nuanced, smaller-scaled and scoped problems. Historians may spend a generation working on one county in New York in a 20-year sweep.

That very often leaves the audience for historical works — that is to say, non-professionals — somewhat bored. What I'm going to try to do is be something of a traitor to my profession and indulge the desire that I think quite a few people have: to have a sense of the large picture, of the whole, of what sense there is to history as an entirety, what it means to us, what we can draw from it, and where we can go with it.

The texts we're going to be looking at will follow that strategy by drawing from a very broad range of disciplines. Some will be philosophers who engage in philosophy of history, either meta-historical or critical. Some will be historians who were concerned to lay out what they saw as the broad patterns of history — either over perhaps 500-year periods, or sometimes, as we'll see in some cases, over the entirety of the human epic. And some of our sources will be from sociologists who are concerned to model the nature of society as it develops over time.

The other part of the focus of the course — not just temporally but spatially — is pretty much restricted, with one exception, to Western European cultures, within which I include the United States.

The reason for this is that the modern West is actually unique in its wholehearted engagement with secular historical consciousness and something that I call historicism, which is particularly unique to the West and particularly modern. Historicism is the doctrine that each historical epoch is in some sense unique, that each culture is in fact grounded in time.

It challenges the notion that there are eternal truths, that there are fundamentally common elements across all cultures, all societies, all beliefs. Historicism argues that each culture grows out of a peculiar set of circumstances, that it has its own criteria for significance — for perhaps truth, if it's a relativistic historicism — and for meaning. That, I would urge, is an exclusively Western view.

I should also point out that not only the modern West, but the West itself is unique in that it is the only culture which accepts linear time. This is something which is incredibly intuitive and obvious to us, and we can't imagine how other people could look at time, though I will try to give you a sense of that in the next lecture.

The basic conception we have is that history follows a straight line — that's the metaphor we use for it — and that it develops, that each

event that occurs along that timeline is unique and is somehow a result of what had preceded it. As we'll see, that view is not what we would expect to find anywhere in the world outside of the West.

Now, the reason I focus on the modern period is that most of that linear history, for the West, has been sacred. It has been the story of creation, through the time of troubles of the Hebrew peoples, for Christians through the epoch of the coming of Christ, and heading towards an eschaton, or end time. It's only in the last 250 years or so that Western philosophy, Western history, and Western speculation has secularized that historical vision, maintaining its linear thrust but removing from it the sacred dimension of providence and of God. Though, as we'll see, God may have been officially banished, he still continues to seep through the cracks in a lot of interpretations.

The timeframe, as I mentioned, is basically from the Enlightenment right up to the present. We'll be dealing with schools of thought and texts written all the way from about 1740 to about the 1980s.

What I'm going to try to do is place this Western linear view, as it develops over these 200 years, in the context of non-Western interpretations in the next lecture. That will afford us a broader perspective on the issues involved, so that we can see what exactly hangs on the belief in linear history.

I would reiterate one more time: there is no culture that defines itself in terms of its own past to the same extent as the West. No nation sees itself as a nation — to the extent that it sees itself as the result of its historical legacies and its actions — as Americans, Englishmen, and Frenchmen do. In fact, no people developed nationalism until they began to adopt Western linear thinking about time.

Not only do we engage history more, but no culture feels the burden of history more than we do. It's hard to imagine, for example, Muslims in the north of India feeling guilt over the actions of their ancestors 500 years ago. Yet it's not hard to imagine Americans

feeling guilt over the legacy of slavery or the treatment of Native Americans. And it is very palpable to imagine the guilt Europeans feel about the Holocaust roughly 40 or 50 years ago, and about the various world wars fought. We not only engage history; we feel it as a burden far more than any other culture.

I want to turn now to the range of problems we're going to be addressing in this course. This gives you a rough sense of the issues we'll be covering, so you can track them as we get to them. I begin with a distinction in the word "history" itself, which can be used in one of two senses.

On the one hand, obviously, it refers to the human past. We talk about the history of man, the history of the United States. In that case, the reference is quite obvious: it's events that have occurred. On the other hand, it also refers to a discipline. There are history departments rather than nature departments — physics studies nature; history studies history. And it refers not only to a discipline, but to a set of accounts, a set of texts, a set of works which are interpretations, reconstructions, and representations of those events. That distinction informs much of the development of the range of problems we're going to be discussing, and in fact it dominates quite a bit of the rumination about the meaning of history and the nature of the historical discipline.

Specifically, we're going to address three different sets of issues: substantive issues, critical issues, and pragmatic issues. Substantive issues are issues that deal with the nature of the historical process as a whole. They raise the most obvious question the layman brings to history: What's its meaning? What's the point?

I want to draw some distinctions here. There are three senses of "meaning." This point was once brought home to me by a philosopher at Columbia, Sidney Morgenbesser, when I went to speak with him about metahistorical issues. I was talking about the

meaning of a historical account, and he said, "What do you mean by meaning?" — which is a curious question, but the point came through to me. There really are three different senses in which we use the term.

One is semantic. There are sentences on a piece of paper. When you want to know the meaning of them, you want to know how you could rephrase those sentences and capture what's trying to be communicated. If I were to speak to you in French and say, "j'ai faim," and you were to ask, "What's the meaning of that?" you're asking for a translation: I'm hungry. We'll call that the semantic sense.

There's another sense of meaning, however, which is intentional. If I ask, "What's the meaning of your coming in here late?" to a student who shows up to class late, what I'm asking is: What is your excuse? What was your intention? What was your goal? It's a very different sense — not semantic content, but purposeful action.

And then there's a third sense of meaning: the sense in which we ask, "What is the meaning of a story?" The best examples here are Aesop's fables. We're told a story — which we can think of as a model of a history — at the end of which we are told the meaning. And that meaning is always the moral: "The moral of the story is..."

History, it might be claimed, has all three sorts of meaning. Historical accounts certainly have semantic content, and one of the things we'll try to examine is what exactly is the reference of statements we make about the past, and how we know whether they can in fact be true. Are they empirically meaningful, or are they just conjecture? Can they be objectively true, or are they just relative to our prejudices? Intentionally, history has a meaning as well — we are often intensely concerned about what someone had in mind when they performed an act. Did Thomas Jefferson really fight for the freedom of man, or was that document he wrote just an excuse to rationalize a self-

interested split with the British Empire and gain French support? And finally, as for the moral of the fable — that is, I would argue, the most profound sense of meaning we can aspire to in history. What can we draw from it? What are the lessons? What moral does it teach us about ourselves, who we are, where we've come from, and what we might like to be? These are the critical questions of substantive philosophy of history.

What, if any, is the meaning of history? And let's point out a possibility: it may not have meaning, at least in that last sense. Fables have a moral to them — is history a fable? Sentences have semantic content — is history a series of sentences?

Another question of substantive philosophy of history is: Where is history headed? Can we see from the past secular trends which point us towards likely outcomes in the future? And why has history taken the course it has?

Has it been capricious? Is it just chance, accident? Was it the wind blowing one particular way one day in Africa that produced consciousness, as Stephen Jay Gould has argued? Or has there been an inner necessity to the development of cause and effect that has led us to where we are today? Are there laws of historical development? Are there analogical principles, similar to the laws of nature, that determine human behaviors and human development over time? Does history have a telos — an end towards which it internally propels itself? Do we see in it a tale of progress, moving towards a specific end, a specific goal? Is history a unique succession of events in the linear sense, where each event is different from the one before it? Or is there nothing new under the sun — just recurrent patterns, over and over again? As we'll see in some subsequent lectures, many figures in the Enlightenment thought that was the case, that history constantly repeats itself. Hume once said something to the effect that if you want to understand an

Englishman and a Frenchman, study the Greeks and Romans, for nothing has changed.

Finally, one of the critical sets of substantive problems in history concerns the subject matter of history itself — whether it is in fact qualitatively different from other disciplines, or even from other human sciences. Here what I'm interested in is the question of whether historical causation is somehow different than causation in the natural world, in the physical world. Whether there is a distinct mode of development among human societies not found in other animal and higher primate communities. Are humans subject to the same mechanical, naturalistic forces as other animals, or is there something distinct about human behaviors? Is human history, in short, part of a distinct metaphysical realm from nature? Is history the site in which we can find freedom, dignity, and purpose?

Those are the substantive issues. The critical issues are generally epistemological and often address the form of historical inquiry and exposition. We examine, on the one hand, the way scholars approach evidence, the way they frame their historical subject matter, and the things they select out for significance and importance. At the same time, we have an interest in how they reconstruct those events. Do they use narrative prose? Social scientific statistics, laws, hypotheses, theories, interpretations? There is a whole range of issues to be addressed.

Is history an art or is history a science? What separates history from literature, and from mere journalistic chronicle? Does history give us knowledge? Does it give us explanations of events, or just descriptions of them? Are historical accounts necessarily narrative, or might they take other forms?

Is the evidential relationship even crucial? One of the interesting developments in recent historiography involves Simon Schama, who has, to some extent, flown free of evidence — placing in evidence

where it wasn't there, knowing fully well that it makes for a better story and, he thinks perhaps rightly, gets closer to the truth. That raises the question of what the relationship is between the past on the one hand, historical evidence on the other, and historical accounts on a third.

In other words, what is the relation between the various historical accounts we have and the interpretive strategies which underlie them? What's the relationship between a Marxist history, a liberal history, and a Hegelian history? Are they three facets of the same reality? Or are they three different models — one of which is true, all of which are true, or none of which are true? How important is evidence? How important are other accounts in informing the way we think about history, perhaps forcing us to focus on some elements and ignore others? Does that lead to distortion? Is it possible to give a complete and coherent account of everything that has happened?

That comes to the question of objectivity. Can history be objective? Is it possible to have an impartial and relatively scientific understanding of what has happened? Or are we limited to a relative knowledge — knowledge which might be relative to our prejudices, relative to our historical perspective, relative to our own goals, desires, and needs, perhaps even relative to our limited access to the direct historical record?

Finally, we're going to address what I would call pragmatic issues — pragmatic in the sense of practical. These are questions that get at our deepest assumptions and desires when we engage with history.

Why do we study history? What's the point? What do we hope to learn from it? Is history the principal form of human self-knowledge? Is it the best way to understand who we are? Or is history perhaps a mistaken way of doing that — a way which leads to undesirable consequences?

Is history a truly meaningful way of understanding our world, or is it a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing? Is our historical self-awareness truly beneficial? Are we best off knowing how we got here and defining ourselves in terms of our historical pasts? We can certainly see two sides to this issue, and it's crucial that we do, because we have really committed ourselves in one direction.

There is a certain benefit, a certain pride, we take in thinking about the achievements of our cultures, our backgrounds, our historical ancestors. We take pride on Veterans Day, on Presidents' Day, thinking about the great sacrifices that a Washington made, that a Lincoln made — thinking about what it means to be an American in light of the sacrifices of the Second World War, the travails of the Korean War, and the dislocations, confusions, and contradictions of the Vietnam War. We think with great pride about the strides we've taken since the Civil Rights Movement, and perhaps with some shame and pain about the history that preceded that moment.

On the other hand, there's another side to that issue as well. Does history necessarily lead to a more understanding relationship with our fellow humans? Consider that almost all of the mass graves filled in the 20th century were filled in the name of history — in the name of historical crimes. Does history divide us? Is it our different histories, and our awareness of them, that leads us to distrust, say, Islamic cultures, or cultures that do not share our own history?

Isn't it, in fact, history — and the belief in a profoundly meaningful sense of historical self-identity — that is leading to precisely the problems that exist in the former Yugoslavia right now? Are they not fighting over something that happened approximately 600 years ago? And if so, how beneficial is it really to have historical self-awareness? Might they not be better off forgetting that they are descendants of a people once conquered by the Turks, some of whom joined the Islamic faith for whatever motives? Is that not

perhaps getting in the way of understanding, cooperation, and building a better future?

Is it sensible for us to feel guilt about things we didn't do? That is again one of the challenges the pragmatic question of history poses. We talk about the way we treated the Native Americans. I wasn't there. None of you were there, I'm certain. Does it make sense for us to feel that we are part of the "we" that did that? And if so, at what point do we stop? Should we feel responsible, as well, for the Crusades against the people who were the original Prussians? Should we feel responsible for the Crusades in the Middle East? Should we feel responsible for the Spanish Inquisition? And if so, should we feel responsible, as descendants of European culture, for sacking the Roman Empire?

At what point do we shed those legacies of guilt and those burdens of history? And at what price? Because perhaps it's precisely when we forget those legacies that we repeat them.

I want to dramatize this question, because in the West we have very much sided in one direction — the view that history is beneficial. I'd like to do so by alluding to a fictional account that tries to stress the other point of view: James Joyce's Ulysses.

In Ulysses, one of the heroes — Stephen Dedalus, who is meant to represent Joyce himself — teaches at an elite private school. The headmaster is an Englishman living in Ireland by the name of Mr. Deasy. Stephen goes to get his paycheck, and Mr. Deasy launches into a rant. He wants Stephen to submit an article for publication in a newspaper on hoof-and-mouth disease and how to cure it, because protecting the cattle industry would help the Irish nation. Stephen agrees, since he needs to get paid. But Deasy also goes out of his way to point out to Stephen that the real danger facing Ireland and the British Empire in general comes from the Jews. Deasy is a brutal

anti-Semite; Stephen is not. Indeed, as Stephen will discover, his spiritual father will be Jewish.

Stephen asks Deasy what exactly is the problem with Jews. Deasy says they sinned against the light. Stephen responds that haven't we all, all the time? Then Deasy says — and this is where Joyce has his greatest ambivalence about history — that history teaches us about the Jews: that they buy cheap and sell dear. Stephen asks whether that isn't the nature of all business. Deasy dismisses this and insists that if you study the history of the Jewish people, you'll understand the menace they represent. Stephen responds: "History is a nightmare from which I'm attempting to awaken." He refuses to judge people on the basis of what their ancestors may have done 500 or 600 years ago. Had he failed to see that history can indeed be that nightmare, he could not have met his spiritual father, Leopold Bloom.

So that is a question we have to engage: Is history, in fact, a nightmare from which we ought to awaken?

Now, how are we going to achieve this task of looking at these problems, of showing the consequences and the range of possible interpretations? We're going to do it by looking at and engaging several pivotal texts, in both a philosophical and historical way. When I say philosophically, I mean I'm going to try to rationally reconstruct the arguments of each of the texts we examine.

The texts cover the major schools of thought on the philosophy, theories, and interpretations of history. We begin with Eliade's Cosmos and History, which will give us background on alternative conceptions of time. We have two lectures on the Enlightenment: one on the early Enlightenment's materialism or naturalism — its propensity to search for the laws of history, the ultimate patterns — and then the high Enlightenment, with its almost romantic cult of

progress, its belief in human perfectibility, and its belief that history is a constant growth of human rationality, potentiality, and freedom.

We will then look at the birth of idealism in perhaps the greatest philosopher of history, G.W.F. Hegel, and his masterful philosophy of history. We'll examine Marx's historical materialism, and then turn to pragmatic questions with Nietzsche's "The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life," which raises issues and characterizes different modes of historiography through a Darwinistic and biological interpretation of the human situation. We'll look at sociologists like Weber and the school of historical sociology, which has had a profound effect on the way we think about and interpret the past.

We'll look at world-historical speculation, a process that began in earnest after the First World War — that universal cataclysm — and its greatest representative, Toynbee. We'll look at 20th-century neo-idealism in the philosopher-historian R.G. Collingwood, who represents a school that was quite large and has had a profound impact on the way history is written. We'll examine critical history, first in its early logical positivist phase in the first half of the century and then in its analytic phase in the second half. We'll look at social history and structuralism — particularly from the Annales school — and then the movement that follows it, post-structuralism. Then we'll turn to a revisitation of the naturalist or materialist interpretation of history with William McNeill. And finally, a conclusion that both sums up and suggests what are the crucial divides in this literature.

These texts come from a broad variety of sources — sociology, history, philosophy. What we're going to do is try to cull from them central issues which we can analyze and place in historical perspective. Not all of those issues were the major concerns of the authors. Quite often the author had something else in mind. In the case of McNeill, his naturalism was a way of getting at

epidemiological problems. But it's the naturalism that concerns us, and that we're going to develop as fully as we can. To some extent, then, we're going to use texts as sources rather than authorities — extracting from them that which interests us.

That in itself is an example of historical interpretation: taking a set of documents and using them in a way that we think exemplifies a historical moment. Each of the texts is meant to be an exemplification of a particular school of thought. Each is chosen because it's either the most accessible, the most readable, or it stresses that school of thought in its starkest possible contrasts.

You'll note as well that the lectures are arranged not only as a philosophical dialogue but also in historical, chronological order. They display the development of the principal schools of thought about history over this period. So what we're going to find is that this is not only a course in the philosophy of history, but in a certain sense the history of the philosophy of history. Each school responds to the one before it, and each school lays the terms for the resolution of its own problems in the next. That development itself could serve as an interesting range of events to plot against whatever particular style or interpretation of history you come to see as most efficacious or truthful.

A word about my style of presentation. I tend to present each text from the inside — a phrase I've taken from R.G. Collingwood. What I mean is that, as far as possible, I will attempt to present the text as if it expressed my own views, making the best possible arguments for it and making it as plausible as I can. Generally, I will try to do this by finding the best arguments the author himself used to present his case. Occasionally I'll try to improve on the author — sometimes we know more than they did. That's one of the benefits of being historians: we're all Monday morning quarterbacks with the 20/20 vision of hindsight. But I will also take moments to criticize, generally

at the end of lectures, and to place things in historical perspective — to mention what was going on at the time in the culture, in politics, in the world-historical scheme that could have led a particular scholar to stress one element at the expense of others.

The last thing I would urge you to be aware of is that many of these texts are by historians, and even those by philosophers of history draw on a wealth of historical data which I can't expect any audience to know — nor is it necessarily required that they do. What I will do instead is substitute for the esoteric and perhaps obscure events used by the authors events that we should all be aware of: famous large-scale historical events, events in American history — which is my training — and events in popular culture, conjunctures and structures of everyday life that we all know and experience.

When we look at Eliade's work, for instance, rather than drawing on anthropological research to illustrate cyclical patterns of behavior, I'll show examples of our own cyclical patterns. Rather than stressing with Vico the various developments of law within the Roman Empire — his paradigm case — I will give a brief encapsulation of it, sum up its significance, and compare it to events we all know. Part of our project, then, is philosophical — rational reconstruction. Part of it is historical — placing things in their historical contexts to see where they've come from and where they're headed. And part of it will be anecdotal and structural: showing analogies and resemblances between one historical moment and another, such as explicating some development in primitive New Year's rituals by looking at our own practices, our own liturgical calendars of rites and rituals.

Finally, I want to return to the overall significance of the course and its open-endedness. We do, in fact, characterize ourselves in terms of our pasts — not only at a social level, but at a national level, and at a species level. It matters profoundly to many people whether we are descended from primates or are an original creation, and how that

descent occurred. But it's not only a social, historical, or species question. It's an individual question, too. Consider how we gain self-understanding and explain ourselves.

Say I have a strange propensity to do some sort of behavior, and you ask me why. Think of the nature of the explanation I'm likely to give. It'll probably be a story about something that happened to me. I pace around when I lecture largely because I was influenced by a great lecturer many years ago who always paced with one hand in his pocket and the other gesturing, and I always wanted to emulate that person. That may seem like a trivial anecdote, but consider what happens when someone is troubled by a traumatic experience. Someone with some kind of psychological dysfunction goes to see a doctor, and what does the psychiatrist or psychologist do? They practice history. They ask: "Tell me about your childhood. When did you first experience this? How did you first interpret it?" They unpack that history, lay it out, and then diagnose it.

Everywhere we look — not just at the national level, not just at the civilizational level, not just at the large-scale species level, but even at the most minute individual level — historical consciousness and historical thinking dominate our approach to the world and our understanding of ourselves.

It's so ubiquitous we're not even aware of it. Think about what a football season is — it's a historical event in which we keep records of what has happened in the past. Nowhere is this more dramatized than in college football, where polls rank which team is the best, which often has nothing to do with what they've done in the last ten weeks. One can easily imagine a team that played poorly in the first five weeks and brilliantly in the last five being denied the national championship. That is a function of how much we stress history. Any playoff structure based on accumulated wins and losses is historicist — it engages us with our past.

Think of how a fan — and since I'm in Washington, I'll speak of the Redskins — explains the current difficulties facing Richie Petitbon. He thinks about it historically: "Well, the team has gotten old. We've had our run at the Super Bowl a few times. It's a natural cycle." And we can see two conceptions of history here as well: a linear and a cyclical view. The linear view says we took off from ground zero and it's been a dynasty, and this is a brief aberration. The cyclical view says you build a team up to its height, then when it gets old and the coach leaves, they fall down, and then the cycle recurs.

Not only are these different interpretations of the past — they give the fan a different way of feeling about it. If it's a story of rocket ascent and you go through two lean years, it can cause despair. The cyclical view has its advantages, though. When you're in the downtime and you're told that all teams go through a downtime — the Cowboys had theirs, the Giants had theirs — that downtime is less painful, because you know the high will return. But that, too, turns out to be less exalted, precisely because you know it will eventually come to an end.

History, in everything we do, permeates our thinking. It is important for us to see, first of all, whether that's a healthy thing, whether that's something we want to continue to engage in and persist in. It's also something we want to ask: if we are going to engage in it, do we want to do so globally? Do we want to continue to think historically about all things at all times? Is there a space from which we must perhaps escape history? And when we do engage history, do we want to do so from any one particular perspective — and if so, which? What are the advantages of seeing history from a particular point of view, whether linear, cyclical, idealist, naturalist, structuralist, or event-driven?

And is any one of those views sufficient to account for all of our history? Might we not take an eclectic view — saying, I want to look

at this particular situation, say football teams, in a cyclical way; I want to look at political history in a linear way; I want to look at cultural development in an idealist way; and I want to look at economic development in a materialist or naturalistic way?

In that sense, there are options open to us. And it's with that thought — that possibility — that I want to leave you today. What I hope to do in this course is present you with a series of resources for thinking about history. Not just history in the grand sense, not just national history, not just Western and civilizational history, but even your own personal histories.

I want to arm you with a set of theories, interpretations, techniques, and visions of the past — whether your own, someone else's, or some larger structure. Once you've tasted everything at the table, you'll be able to form a judgment about what works for you and what doesn't, and take that and apply it wherever you need to in life. When events happen in your own life, or in the newspapers, or anywhere else, you'll be able to place them in a perspective that gives meaning for you, and give them just as much meaning as you think is necessary.

I'm going to try to provide a relatively value-neutral interpretation of each of the various schools of history, and will at the end try to make a fair, even-handed case for what I consider the two major ways of looking at the human past in any scope or scale. Once you're armed with that, you're in a position to make those choices, to make those decisions, and to use history in such a way as to make your own history meaningful, pleasant, and at least bearable.

Lecture 2: Mircea Eliade's Cosmos and History and Cyclical Time

The topic of this lecture is an examination of a remarkable book called *Cosmos and History* by Mircea Eliade. Eliade is probably this century's greatest historian of religious ideas — a scholar of incredible depth, breadth, insight, and compassionate understanding. This summer I read his three-volume *History of Religious Ideas*, and I cannot imagine a scholar of broader range, covering everything from the religion of Paleolithic times through Sufism, Sunnism, the Mahayana way, Jainism, Christianity, and Gnosticism — the whole spectrum of religious engagement in its various forms.

In this text, Eliade is very concerned to examine the origins of our historicist engagement in the West with linear time: how that came to be, when it began, and what it portends for us.

He is also concerned to show its contrast and context — that of the cyclical conceptions of time and history found in most traditional cultures, cultures which are not Western, and not only traditional cultures but the civilizations that emerge from them outside of Judeo-Christian Europe.

He is not only interested in showing that context. One of the most fascinating features of this text is that Eliade, as a historian showing to some extent a linear progression, is eager to defend the interpretation of history on non-linear terms. He wants to show not only how it is that other peoples may not see time in linear terms, but why they wouldn't — and why, in fact, they may be right and we may be wrong.

His strategy is largely anthropological. He expounds and analyzes various non-linear conceptions as they develop. It's also a

justificatory scheme: he tries to place them in their best light and show how they function and what purpose they serve. In many ways it's an attempt to foster sympathetic understanding of peoples and cultures that don't share our engagement with the past, and to suggest that our own understanding of history may have a short historical shelf life.

One of the challenges of presenting this text is that it draws on a wealth of anthropological information — loads of examples from cultures across time and space — which are impossible to summarize here. As I've mentioned previously, I'm going to replace examples from primitive, traditional, and high civilized cultures with examples from our own society and culture. One of the interesting features of Eliade's argument is that although we are a linear historical culture, we have nevertheless preserved, underneath our linear consciousness, traces of our previous cyclical engagement. There are plenty of cyclical historical awarenesses, models, and practices that inform our life even today in the late 20th-century West, and I'm going to draw on those examples to convey the justification and the sense of cyclical history as opposed to linear history.

The crux of Eliade's argument will hang on pragmatic issues — issues of practical concern. What are the consequences of engaging with history in a linear and historicist way? And what, on the other hand, are the consequences of failing to do that? Keep those pragmatic concerns in mind as we examine the range of cases, events, and structures that Eliade details.

To sum up his view briefly: the major theme of the work is what he calls archaic man — ancient man — and his place in the cosmos, in contrast with modern man and his place in history. Cosmos and history. He states: "In studying these traditional societies, one characteristic has especially struck us. It is their revolt against

concrete historical time, their nostalgia for a periodic return to the mythical time of the beginning of things, to the 'great time.'"

We begin our examination with a discussion of archetypes and repetition. Traditional cultures and traditional man give no value to human actions or events of the external world unless they are imitations of sacred and mythic archetypes. The unique events that we consider historical are precisely the events with which they have the least interest and engagement. When a unique event occurs, there is a desire to place it in a ritual and archetypal formula. Only the sacred, celestial archetypes and the actions that imitate them are considered truly real. All of these actions can be reduced to rituals, and all of these rituals recreate the primordial first acts of the gods and their children, the heroes.

I want to show two examples of the way we do this even today in the West. When a political leader displays an incredible amount of character and integrity, that person is generally placed in the context of a previous archetypal hero. A politician shows great integrity, and we say: this person is another Washington in steadfast integrity, possessing the statesmanship of a Lincoln, the egalitarian ethos of a Jackson, the wisdom of a Jefferson, or the prickly personality of an Adams. We always reach back to these archetypes.

It's worth pointing out that these are archetypes in the sense that the historical personalities in popular consciousness rarely correspond to the actual personalities of these figures. They did the things for which they are famous, and they did have those traits, but those traits are elevated because they are archetypal heroic acts. Everything else they did is ignored and downplayed.

In recent weeks I've heard a similar sort of mythic archetype applied to our current president. Analysts have said he's another FDR in his compassion, another Roosevelt in his sweeping plans. He has also modeled himself after an archetypal figure — John F. Kennedy —

carrying that legacy forward. Everything we find meaningful and profound, we place in an archetypal relation.

This not only occurs at the secular political level; it obviously occurs in the religious sphere as well. The Christian saint is one who imitates the life of Christ. He's not simply a figure who existed at one particular time — he's an archetype of right behavior, a pattern for how we ought to live and think. Hence the practice of imitating Christ; he is an example for us. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the Buddha is never an entirely original personality. There are many different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, each corresponding to a particular type, and we can see in them certain common fundamental characters. Similarly, in the early medieval cult of saints, the saints are clearly modeled on archetypal pagan heroes. Saint George is the knight who slays the dragon.

We should also note that when unique events do occur among traditional cultures, there is a tendency to quickly interpret them as archetypal moments — a breakthrough, an epiphany, or what Eliade calls a hierophany, in which the divine or celestial breaks through to earth. When Jacob has a vision — known as Jacob's Ladder, of angels ascending and descending — he declares that the spot where he rested his head is sacred celestial ground and builds an altar there. The same can be said of Mount Sinai: it is God's mountain for the ancient Hebrews, the place where he communicates with his people.

This is true not only of people but of territories, temples, and cities — all of which have celestial archetypes and are conceived as copies of some pattern transcending the merely profane historical. Each ziggurat or pyramid is meant to be a copy of the cosmic mountain upon which the gods live. The acropolises of ancient classical Greece are situated at the highest point of their cities — hence "acropolis," above the polis — because the gods live on the mount, on Mount Olympus, and we replicate their order here on earth.

In our own modern linear religions we can find obvious analogies. All synagogues orient toward Jerusalem — the archetypal center of the universe because that is where God communicates with man. All mosques orient toward Mecca — where God communicated with Muhammad and where Muhammad instituted the Hajj, or pilgrimage to the Kaaba. Medieval Christianity had a similar orientation toward Jerusalem, hence the Crusades: that was the site of Golgotha, the site of the holy tree — the second holy tree, the first being the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the second being the Holy Rood, where Christ was sacrificed to atone for that original sin.

We can also see this in architecture. Go to a cathedral. One of the most fascinating things about a cathedral — aside from the awesome effect of the linearity you experience from its soaring height — is that if you can see it from above, every cathedral is built in the shape of a crucifix, of the cross. And where are the sacraments dispensed? Where is the altar? If you think of the interior of the cathedral as a cross, where is the body and blood of Christ? In the heart. All altars are placed directly in the heart of Christ. The church is the body of Christ, and the cathedral and its altar replicate in archetypal terms that symbolism of the center.

Another feature of archetype and repetition is the repetition of the cosmogony — the creation of the world out of chaos. Almost all mythologies include creation myths in which the world is created out of a primordial chaos. This is least apparent, perhaps, in Judeo-Christianity, but even in Genesis, God hovers over the deep, the Tehom, which is probably cognate with Tiamat, the goddess of chaos in Mesopotamian religion.

For traditional cultures, all new buildings and constructions are a repetition of that cosmogony — creating order out of chaos. We can think of this in our own practices: the laying of cornerstones, which establish the center and order of a building; the laying of

foundations; the christening of ships, which marks the transition from an assemblage of structures to a seafaring vessel ready to engage the world.

Another example of this ritual dimension is the notion that all rituals have a divine model — that they originate in a divine action, founded by gods or heroes, never by men, and that we simply reenact them to get back in touch with that primordial reality. Consider the point of Sabbatarianism: it is literally an identification and repetition of God's activities. For six days he labored; on the seventh he rested. Insofar as we take Sabbatarianism seriously, we are repeating that action and living according to a pattern laid down not by an individual or by historical development, but in illo tempore — from the beginning, from the great time, when it was first established by God himself.

The Passover service is not simply commemorative. The rituals were laid down by the heroic actions of Moses and the tribes. Why do the Jews eat unleavened bread? Because they did not have time to let their bread rise when fleeing Egypt. They don't simply commemorate the event — the Passover service says we should feel as if each one of us was personally taken out of Egypt with a strong hand. The goal is not so much to remember what happened as to relive it, right here, right now. And that is not unique to Judaism. Christianity does it as well. Consider the Easter service, the Passion of Christ — not simply a commemoration but a reliving. Consider Lent. Always these are patterns established by the god or hero, which we relive when we wish to get in touch with ultimate reality. We take the Mass because Christ instituted it. The Easter service was instituted by Christ.

For primitive man, all marriages and their rites recreate the hieros gamos — the sacred marriage of the gods, always a mating ritual that symbolically creates the world. Ouranos lays upon Gaia, sky upon earth, and they are separated by their child Eros; the sky is thus

placed above the earth. We can replicate examples endlessly, but we can see that these rituals survive in our own marriage ceremonies. Why do we throw rice on a newlywed couple? It's an ancient fertility ritual — rice symbolizes fertility, being the most efficient grain to produce. In throwing rice, we are recreating that first moment in which the original hieros gamos created life and the world. The first, ultimate fertility is recreated in each marriage and its rites.

And finally, there is repetition in the interpretation of history itself. All history is mythicized to follow mythic archetypes, and whatever cannot be reduced to a pattern that carries meaning is dismissed as meaningless. Profane time — the historically unique — is banished from consciousness. What we focus on in historical action is the archetypal, the pattern with which we find meaning.

This is not something dead in the West; it remains very much alive. We can find examples not only in common rituals but in actual historical episodes. Eliade provides two that I'd like to share briefly. The first involves a historical personage in South Slavic heroic poetry.

Marko Kraljević, protagonist of the South Slavic epic, became famous for his courage during the second half of the 14th century. His historical existence is unquestionable, and we even know the date of his death, 1394. But no sooner was Marko's historical personality received into popular memory than it was abolished and his biography reconstructed in accordance with the norms of myth. His mother becomes a vila, a fairy, just as the Greek heroes were sons of nymphs or naiads. His wife is also a vila, whom he wins through a ruse, taking great care to hide her wings lest she find them, take flight, and abandon him — which, in certain variants of the ballad, is precisely what happens after the birth of their first child. So we have a real historical personality of the 14th century who, no sooner than he is dead, has all his unique historical activities reduced to archetypal actions found in previous myths.

Eliade also gives an example from the 20th century. Just before the last war — and here he means the Second World War — the Romanian folklorist Constantin Brăiloiu had occasion to record a remarkable ballad in a village in Maramureș. Its subject was a tragedy of love. A young suitor had been bewitched by a mountain fairy, and a few days before his wedding, the fairy, driven by jealousy, had flung him from a cliff. The next day, shepherds found his body and, caught in a tree, his hat. They carried the body back to the village, and his fiancée came to meet them. Upon seeing her lover dead, she poured out a funeral lament full of mythological allusions — a liturgical text of rustic beauty. Such was the content of the ballad.

In the course of recording the variants he was able to collect, the folklorist tried to learn when the tragedy had occurred. He was told it was a very old story that had happened long ago. Pursuing his inquiries, however, he learned that the events had taken place not quite 40 years earlier. He eventually discovered that the heroine was still alive, went to see her, and heard the story from her own lips. It was a quite commonplace tragedy: one evening, her lover had slipped and fallen over a cliff. He had not died instantly; his cries were heard by mountaineers who carried him to the village, where he died soon after. At the funeral, his fiancée, along with the other women of the village, had repeated the customary ritual lamentations without the slightest allusion to a mountain fairy. We can see in this a clear attempt, when secular profane history breaks through, to reduce it to archetypal formulations.

The next fundamental issue that engages the cyclical conception of time is the regeneration of time. Traditional and non-Western cultures see time as cyclical rather than linear. In its most primitive basis, this is simply a naturalistic awareness of certain biological rhythms. The seasons are, in fact, cyclical: they recur over and over again, moving from a height of creativity and life in the spring and

summer to a period of degeneration and barrenness in the fall, and then beginning the cycle again. Similarly, the same thing occurs within the human lifespan, from birth to maturity to old age to death to new birth. It is this awareness of bio-cosmic rhythms that informed the cyclical conception of time and history.

We see this in the phenomenon of the new year and the cosmogony, where each new year in the traditional conception is a recreation of the world out of chaos. The Babylonians had a calendar of 360 days. The five remaining days at the end were considered outside of the year — the world had reverted into chaos. This was marked by a period of Saturnalia: all social roles were suspended, the king was no longer an exalted figure, the peasants and serfs were no longer debased, sexual license was granted, and riotous feasting and celebration occurred. Then, on the first day of the new year, order was reestablished when the king and queen ascended to the top of the ziggurat and performed the ritual hieros gamos, recreating order in the world. Every year this occurred.

And it has not died. Why do we have our Saturnalia on New Year's Eve? Because the sense is that the year has run its course. There is a cessation of time allowing us to engage in a formless, orderless, spontaneous eruption of primordial urges, followed by a rigorous return to order. That is also the reason we have New Year's resolutions: each year is a new year with new potentialities and new possibilities. We wipe clean the burden of the last year. Yes, it's true I couldn't lose weight last year, but this year is going to be different. There is a belief in the continuous regeneration of time.

This is a very hard doctrine for Westerners to fully appreciate, but most non-archetypal, non-ritual, profane activity is, in fact, unbearable. Consider the sorts of events we consider unique: war, famine, plague, murder, catastrophe. Then consider the things we find valuable and pleasant in our life cycles: marriage, childbearing,

maturity, success — all of which are repetitive. The former are all unique. So the goal is that as these unique, unbearable events occur — a child dies, a harvest fails — the regeneration of the world at the end of the year offers a new beginning and banishes from consciousness, for those who hold a cyclical worldview, the memory of the profane, the unreal, and the unbearable. When the past is destroyed, so are its sins and evils. All that we did wrong, that burden of conscience and guilt, is banished. We are given a clean slate to begin again.

These regeneration rites are thus fundamentally anti-historical. They attempt to deny what we would call history. As the year degenerates — just as the seasons degenerate — we see increasing weakness and feebleness; time becomes the undoing of everything. Hence the need for a new beginning.

We find that even among the classical Greeks and Romans, there was a belief in universal conflagration: the idea that the universe, existing in time, grows old and degenerates — ceases to be as fertile, as productive, as vibrant — until at a certain point everything burns up, everything explodes, and it begins again, fresh, just as spring follows winter. This brings us to the topic of misfortune and history.

This is where the West is most challenged, because traditional and non-Western man is acutely aware that the unique, non-repetitive, non-archetypal events that comprise profane history are almost exclusively misfortunes: war, disease, famine, destruction, plague. In history, as in journalism, good news is no news. What is news are dramatic crisis events. This is a difficult burden — the fact that tragedies occur all the time, unique tragedies over which we have no control.

Traditional and non-Western man deals with this by denying the value of such events, by denying their ultimate reality. The high cultural expression of this is the myth of eternal return, which I'll

return to shortly. Broadly speaking, it is a notion of growth, maturation, decay, universal conflagration, and then beginning all over again.

What traditional man understands is that suffering is a normal experience. Primitive people know, in a way that we have lost, that all life comes from death. This is difficult not so much for Westerners to understand intellectually, but for modern 20th-century people to fully feel, largely because of the last 70 years. I would call it the supermarket syndrome. We all know, theoretically, that our food comes from an animal or a plant. But deep down, we're not really certain of it in the way that people once were. When you get a steak out of the refrigerated bin, it feels as though it comes from a steak machine. Before refrigeration, you knew exactly where it came from — you took it from an animal's flesh, an animal you had perhaps raised and cared for. You killed it and ate it.

That reality has produced moral vegetarianism in some. But primitive planters wouldn't have been consoled by vegetarianism either, because plants are alive — they grow and mature — and we only eat them by killing them. So all life comes from death. All existence is placed within a biological, ecological niche that we call the food chain. And that is a terrifying thought: that all of our life, all of our existence, is based on killing, on predation, on blood.

As a result, traditional man cannot help but be aware that suffering is the normal situation of life. All animals must kill or be killed. Cyclical worldviews try to make this suffering bearable — they are a strategy to make it comprehensible, and to allow us to continue to live our lives despite this psychological terror. Such worldviews offer three things. First, they assign suffering a meaning. Why do we suffer? Why do these horrible events occur? Because they are the result of a primordial sin committed in the first time — someone killed the goddess who gave us food, and from her death came the banana

plant or the rice paddy. We might also learn that we suffer because we incorrectly perform an archetypal ritual, and the gods are punishing us for acting in a unique, historically contingent way.

Second, a cyclical worldview offers a potential remedy. If you're having a drought, the solution is to engage in a ritual — do the rain dance, placate the gods, do whatever is necessary according to the archetypal patterns that produce the desired result. Many of you will be skeptical and say: but that doesn't really cause rain. Yes, I know it doesn't. But if you don't know what causes rain, and you're out there with your crops withering, the belief that you might be able to bring rain could mean the difference between getting in a late harvest and starving to death. It has a tremendous pragmatic value.

Third — and perhaps most important — most cyclical beliefs hold what Eliade calls the lunar conception: because of the cyclical nature of life and death, suffering and death are never truly final. They are always followed by rebirth. These religions are called lunar because they are generally identified with the moon, which waxes and wanes, dies, is swallowed by darkness, and then reappears — is reborn three days later. We too have this archetype of rebirth. Christ suffered, died, was interred, swallowed by the earth, and emerged reborn three days later. And that is the way of making death bearable: if you are part of a traditional culture and your child dies of some horrible disease, you say, this is a tragedy, but I know his soul will be preserved and he will be reborn.

Traditional cultures treat unique history as meaningless. It is only with the Hebrew prophets that we begin to see history — unique developments, profane historical events — as being profoundly meaningful, as in fact being a theophany, a revelation of God's will to man.

The Hebrew prophets were acutely aware that these unique events were almost all calamities — stories of various nations and peoples

coming in and conquering Israel and burning it to the ground over and over again. The prophets read these events as negative theophanies: statements by God that his chosen people had failed to live up to their end of the covenant — a kind of chiding that a parent gives a child who has acted poorly.

As such, they placed tremendous significance on linear development in time, where linear history is the providential unfolding of God's plan — an epiphany of God's will and goals breaking through the secular and profane. This vision is extended into the future, obviously, with the messianic eschatology of the Judeo-Christian prophets. The messianic prophets of Judeo-Christianity see in the future an end to history, a final solution to the historical problem, which will redeem all of the tremendous suffering that has occurred in the past.

I want to point out that these messianic prophets are a rugged spiritual elite — spiritual warriors, people who face tremendous suffering and calamity and decide to stare it in the face and say: yes, it is real, and it is meaningful, and it is profound. That is a very difficult psychological burden to bear. Their weapon is faith. One of the Hebrew prophets might have said: yes, all the history that has occurred to the Hebrew people since the founding of Israel is tragedy. But have faith. Israel will be refounded; the Davidic dynasty will return, and Israel will resume its place as a great nation. And for Christians, that becomes a cosmic messianism in which history will be redeemed, a last judgment will occur, and everything will be made perfect.

Those of you who know your Old Testament know that this was an elite position — not widely held. The prophets constantly note that the common people of Israel are praying to the Ashtaroth — the Canaanite fertility goddess — and to the Baalim, and the various other gods. All of these gods are archetypal, mythic gods of cyclical

time. The peasants didn't have that faith; they found it too difficult to bear. But this becomes a unique legacy for the West, because all other civilized peoples used cyclical time to refuse history, to deny its reality.

Time, or duration, threatens the cosmos because it brings old age, weakness, and degeneration. The answer is the universal conflagration, and it is here that I want to detail the notion of eternal return. The myth runs something as follows: the world is created by the will of a god — Brahma, Vishnu, whoever it may be. Then is instituted a golden age where the gods live on earth with men. Then comes a next age where the gods communicate with men but do not live among them. Then another age where men live without direct divine contact. And then a dark time — in India it is called the Kali Yuga, the time of Kali the destroyer — when things fall apart and war, famine, plague, and destruction predominate. Then, finally, there is universal conflagration. And then the whole cycle starts all over again, every act of the first cycle repeated once more.

One of the surprises to Western consciousness is that we, in most of these conceptions, are living in the Kali Yuga right now — in the dark time. And that is actually a consolation. Why? First of all, it explains why things are not as we would like them to be — why the good die young and things are not as we would desire. The reason is that it is a natural process, unavoidable, not our fault, and not something we should blame ourselves for. And second, it is not permanent. It will not last — things will get a little worse, and then everything will start all over again.

Precisely because these cycles run over and over, they are ultimately without singular weight. They have no real linear import. And for that reason, they are bearable. For that reason, Hindus in India could endure conquest by a fairly intolerant Islamic regime, followed by the British, because these events are not ultimately significant — not

ultimately real. What is truly real is each person's individual relation with the cosmos through archetypal action and ritual.

This brings us finally to the question of the terror of history. Eliade's thesis is that profane history is so terrifying, so brutal and intimidating, that linear consciousness in the West has always had, at best, a limited and tenuous grasp on people's lives — and for very good reasons. He suspects it may have an extremely limited future.

First, he notes the survival of the myth of eternal return even within the West. Popular Christianity is largely archetypal, particularly in the medieval epoch, and largely cyclical as well. Its liturgical calendars and rites recreate over and over again the events established in the first time, in the strong time: the Christmas mass, Easter, the Mass itself. Medieval historical speculation was generally cyclical, or at least had a cyclical component — always three ages followed by the eschaton.

It is really only from the 17th century onward that there is a clear push for a purely linear historical consciousness. Modern secular historicism — the view that history is profoundly meaningful, that each event is unique, and that there is no extra-historical reference point by which we can judge historical epochs — offers nothing to redeem the terror of history. It offers no consolations whatsoever. It is that rugged spiritual elite, but without the prop of faith.

How, in our secular historicist and linear conception of time, do we redeem ethnic cleansing, genocide, Stalin's purges, Mao's purges, two world wars? How do we make those tragedies somehow bearable? For us, these events are profoundly meaningful — they are part of who we are. That is a heavy burden to bear.

Eliade notes that Marxism does offer some help in this regard, because Marxism does have an eschatological faith: all of this suffering is necessary because it will result in the world revolution, ushering in human freedom, rationality, universal love, and a time of

unequaled plenty and complete self-fulfillment for all. But that is because Marxism retains the faith of Christianity and merely secularizes it.

Those who refuse to engage in that sort of secular, historicist quasi-religion find the burden of historicism too heavy. Eliade notes two examples: T.S. Eliot, who when faced with this question discovered the need to return to traditional Christianity and to faith; and James Joyce, who, as I've mentioned before, saw history as a nightmare and was drawn to the notion of eternal return. As we'll see, Joyce's particular version draws on the subject of the next lecture: Giambattista Vico. Eliade sees the most sensitive secular souls of his time fleeing historicism.

Ironically, the modern historicist man is swept away, in his own conception at least, by forces vastly beyond his control. As we'll see with the linear theories of history, history is made by forces greater than any individual. Man is still powerless. Each individual is still a victim of history, even the great man — even the most powerful are victims of forces beyond their control: the forces of production, the movement of the world spirit, the growth of human culture. But precisely because these forces are said to be real, the terrors of history are all the more palpable, and the meaning attached to them becomes their ultimate reality.

In conclusion, Eliade argues that linear history cannot be confronted without faith in a divine providence behind history. If we lack that faith and yet continue to believe in a linear conception of time, we are destined to experience Weltschmerz — world weariness, a sense of being crushed under the weight of the past. His prophecy is that we will wind up giving enormous sums of money to psychologists and psychiatrists.

Lecture 3: The Early Enlightenment and the Search for Laws of History — Vico's New Science of History

We are going to examine a remarkable work written in the early Enlightenment by Giambattista Vico called *The New Science*. It is an excellent example of one of the historiographical and philosophical projects of the early Enlightenment with respect to history.

I want to begin by briefly discussing some of the characteristics of the early Enlightenment — by which I mean the period before about 1750. The early Enlightenment was characterized by a commitment to what we might call a naturalistic metaphysic, also known as mechanistic materialism. This view of reality was largely based on the successes of Newtonian science in the preceding decades. It looked to science as the means to all rational and possible knowledge. There was a great sense of breakthrough following Newton's laws of gravitation, and with the growing understanding of how the heart and circulatory system worked. There was a sense that, with a little effort, all of nature could be subsumed under the kind of mathematical laws and analyzed through the experimental method that Newton had axiomatized in his *Principia*.

The impetus of this scientific revolution very quickly, in the early Enlightenment, was directed toward the human sciences. There was a strong urge to take the success Newton had achieved in understanding nature and apply the same techniques, the same method, the same approach to the understanding of humanity itself. The phrase commonly heard at the time was "the science of man" — a scientific understanding of humanity.

This project is naturalistic and mechanistic in the sense that it attempts to explain the nature of man without recourse to any principles one would not find in the explanation of natural phenomena. There is an attempt to avoid what might be called entelechy or teleology — the view that things naturally tend toward certain internal end states — and instead to replace that old Aristotelian legacy with the Newtonian conception of law, of regularity, of constant conjunction of certain phenomena always leading to the same results.

The science of man took two forms. One was what we might call scientific psychology: an attempt to categorize and model the laws of human behavior, the laws of the operation of the human mind. Perhaps the most famous philosopher in this regard was David Hume, whose treatises and inquiries were all attempts to exhibit the fundamental structure of our cognitive capacities and the laws by which we form our thoughts and beliefs. Previously, Spinoza had attempted to do the same thing for our emotional states, producing a deductive, axiomatic, rigorous scientific method that, after positing a few fundamental drives and entities, was able to deduce all of the other emotional states that characterize human nature.

That was one approach. The other was to understand the science of man through a study of the laws of historical causation — to look for the regularities, the constant causal forces that produce change over time in societies, between societies, and among nations. Again, the goal was to omit teleological end states and replace them with mechanisms that could explain change.

The Enlightenment has often been criticized as anti-historical in its orientation, precisely because it conceived of human nature as fixed, static, and eternal. As we will see, one of the developments of historicism is the view that this is in fact not the case — that human nature is malleable and constantly changing, growing, and

developing with each epoch and each shifting set of historical circumstances and cultural inputs. While there is some truth to that criticism, it is not entirely fair. Even within a mechanistic framework, even while positing certain fundamental proclivities, there was still room for development and historical change within the early Enlightenment's conception of history.

What is remarkable about Giambattista Vico is that he combines both approaches in his *New Science*. Vico was a professor of rhetoric at Naples who argued that history develops along lines that replicate the patterns of human cognitive and psychological development, and that these follow certain discrete patterns, each of which gives rise to the next in an almost exclusively mechanistic fashion. We have with Vico a developmental model — one that has a sense of change, uniqueness, and difference, and yet at the same time searches for law and regularity, for a scientific explanation of historical change.

Vico's work was relatively obscure in his own lifetime. That changed in the 19th century. With the development of historicism, particularly among German philosophers, Vico was finally rediscovered as the great asset he truly was — a profound scholar and theorist of history, regarded in many ways as a precursor to Hegel and other influential thinkers of the 19th century. His work has also had a profound impact on some 20th-century literature and philosophy, most famously the writing of James Joyce, whose *Finnegans Wake* is in fact a mythopoetic Viconian history structured around what Vico would call the *corso e ricorso* — the course and recourse of history.

We begin our discussion with the epistemological status of history. Vico was, as I've mentioned, an Italian scholar and part of the rationalist tradition in European philosophy. That tradition had been dominated by its great founder, René Descartes, whose epistemology was based on clear and distinct ideas — the view that the mark of truth of any belief, conception, or concept is the extent

to which it can be apprehended by the mind with absolute clarity and distinction. His model was, of course, geometry and mathematics, where one has completely formal definitions of all entities: a triangle is a two-dimensional, three-sided, enclosed figure; every triangle has interior angles summing to 180 degrees; only triangles have that property. That was his model for rational thought and science.

This raised a major problem for history. Unlike mathematics and geometry, history's objects are not clear and distinct — they arise from experience and are far more ambiguous. We do not define a state; we gesture at one. If someone asks what a politician is, you typically don't produce a definition — you point to examples: well, George Bush was a politician, Bill Clinton is a politician, and so on. Moreover, history is not amenable to experimentation. One cannot say: let's test whether it was really the calling of the Estates General that caused the French Revolution by starting it all over and not calling the Estates General. That is not a possibility for historical understanding. The Cartesian epistemology therefore effectively precluded history from being anything more than anecdotal. It was not a domain of scientific understanding, and because it did not yield clear and distinct concepts, it could not be a science.

Vico critiques this argument, beginning with the principle that underlaid it: Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes sought one unquestionable principle from which he could deduce the rest of his philosophy — I think, therefore I am, an undeniable proposition — and used it to build his epistemological doctrine. Vico's argument is that the certainty of the *cogito*, the certainty that because you are thinking you must exist, is in fact intuitive, unreflective, and not the product of inference or deliberate contemplation. It is something more in the order of self-awareness — similar to the awareness that I

have a pain in my stomach or had a headache last night. Not to say that it is not knowledge, but it is clearly sub-scientific.

Moreover, Vico argued that the clarity and distinction criterion of truth applies only to mathematics. And it applies only to mathematics because the objects of mathematics are conceptual innovations. This was an important breakthrough on Vico's part. In line with the nominalists, he argues that there are really no triangles — no numbers — in the external world. One never comes in contact with a "one," never stubs one's toe on a pentagon. These are fictions, conceptual innovations built up from axiomatic schemes. The reason we can have clarity and distinction about them is precisely because we created them axiomatically. That precision is built in by the fact that we created them with that precision, because we wanted to do precise work with them.

Physical entities, by contrast — the sorts of things subject to scientific understanding — are based on experience, and we do not have clarity and distinction for our scientific concepts. There is no clear and distinct notion of matter or force; we can characterize force only in terms of its relations to other things — $F = ma$, and so on. The way we come to understand that is not through deduction but through experiment and experience. The experimental method gives us a practical certainty, not an absolute certainty, about the nature of the physical world. In fact, it gives us incomplete knowledge, as evidenced by the historical growth of scientific understanding: Newton is supplanted by Einstein.

So Vico argues that the *cogito* and the epistemology that grows from it needs to be replaced by a principle he calls *verum factum*: we know what we have made. The reason we know the truth about mathematics with clarity and distinction is because we made those mathematical entities — we invented, posited, and formulated them. Even in science, our experiments amount to a kind of making — an

incomplete making, but nonetheless one that gives us an incomplete practical certainty. History is obviously made exclusively by humanity. Therefore, since it is cognitively constructed by man, it can be understood by man with scientific certainty.

What he means by "making" is this: when we make a concept in physics, we take a range of phenomena and cognitively construct them into an entity. Because we have cognitively constructed it in a precise way to accord with our experimental results, we have, in a sense, mentally made it as an object — demarcated a range of experiential phenomena, parsed them into a unit, and called it a particular thing. The upshot is that Vico, in his own mind at least, established that history can be a science and can be known with scientific certainty.

I want to turn now to the course of history as Vico envisioned it. Vico held to a cyclical theory of history which is nonetheless not to be confused with eternal return. He believed that certain patterns recurred over and over in historical development, but that as a nation moved through an entire cycle and began again, there was nonetheless development between cycles. Each cycle is in its own way unique and has its own particular characteristics. These cycles — or rather stages within them — constitute a common course of development that Vico believed one could find in every nation, civilization, and culture. He argued that all civilizations go through three distinct stages, each representing a distinct realization of the potentialities of human nature — a distinct level of cultural activity, consciousness, and what we might call mentality.

He also argues that the mentality and institutions that typify a particular stage are preserved even as new institutions and mentalities develop in later stages. In a sense, nothing is entirely lost in history — elements of the older mentality survive. We saw this in

Eliade as well: cyclical conceptions dating from our prehistory still have a place within our modern linear historical experience.

What moves history through these stages is a precise mechanism: class struggle. In this way, Vico is a remarkable precursor to Marx. He sees in the development of a society greater social differentiation among its members in terms of stratification into classes, groups, and castes, and he sees the natural tendency for these groups to struggle against one another for power, privileges, and material advantage. As they struggle, they move history from one stage to another. Each stage becomes increasingly popular, humanistic, and democratic. When the cycle has finally run its course and reached the ultimate expression of human equality and rationality, the civilization in question undergoes dissolution — either through internal disintegration or external conquest. When that happens, the entire process begins anew.

The scope of Vico's theory — the domain of historical phenomena he wants to account for — is the profane history of the post-Diluvian Gentiles: the nations that descended from Noah after the flood but were not the Hebrews. Whether it was due to extreme piety or to prudence, Vico chose to exclude from his theory the history of the ancient Hebrews and the history of Christ. He argues that shortly after the flood, there are several hundred years of a return to a brutal barbarism, as the non-Hebrew descendants of Noah wander through the forests, lose the ability to speak, and lose whatever civilization they had before.

For our purposes, we will treat this bracketing — that pietistic or prudential exclusion of the Hebrews — by understanding Vico as beginning from the emergence of primitive man, since for him the post-Diluvian wandering represents what we would consider prehistoric humanity. The primary focus and paradigm case with which Vico works is Hellenic classical Greece and Rome. This is in part

because of the wealth of available sources, particularly for an Italian in Naples — no lack of legal, philosophical, and literary documents from the Roman Republic and Empire. But it is also in part due to the classical Hellenic world's obvious affiliation with the culture of Western Europe, the ancestor civilization from which Vico felt we had developed. Its history is held to be typical in the sense of an archetype — the pattern of development that would occur everywhere, absent external influences such as the intrusion of divine providence or the intrusion of one civilization upon another.

The means Vico uses are what I would call an empathic understanding — the kind of empathic understanding one finds in anthropology — a thinking of oneself into the position of the historical actor of the time, attempting to get inside their psychological and cognitive perspective. The other technique he uses — and here he is a precursor to Nietzsche — is philological research. He felt that studying the structure and history of language, the development of words, enabled one to understand the development of mentalities, mind-frames, and cultures.

I want now to turn to the three stages themselves. The first is what Vico calls the **age of the gods**. Primitive man, in Vico's sense, is a beastly creature of extremely limited consciousness — barely outside the animal state. His fundamental proclivities are instinctual, aggressive, and predatory; he is crude and violent. Vico characterizes these figures as giants, in accord with both scriptural accounts and the Homeric account in which Ulysses visits the Cyclops. He argues that the Cyclops is a paradigm of primitive man — giant in the sense of being intellectually dwarfed.

The first breakthrough from prehistory to history proper is the establishment of the family state, which Vico considers the first fundamental institution of the age of the gods. His argument runs as follows. Primitive man lived in jungles and forests, wandered wildly,

had sex whenever the desire prompted him, and had no lifelong mates. At some point, thunder and lightning in the sky produced overwhelming fear in some of these primitive peoples, prompting them to take shelter in caves. When they took shelter, they chose particular women and dragged them along. Those were the first marriages.

Part of what prompts Vico to make this interpretation is his examination of Paleolithic caves in Europe, which he recognized as the dwellings of the first people, whose art represents a primitive, imagistic consciousness. These first primitive men living in caves believed in storm gods, gods of thunder. We are acquainted with many of them: Zeus, Jove, Marduk, Indra, Thor, Donner — every culture has one, particularly early primitive cultures — all jealous, wrathful, sky warrior deities who hurl thunderbolts like spears. Their thunderbolt is a message and a command, hurled when something bad has been done.

And so the principal form of wisdom in this age of the gods is augury. If you want to know what the gods demand, capture a dove, cut it open, and read its liver — its internal organs will tell you, because the dove comes from the sky, the realm of the sky god. Augury was indeed a prevalent practice in many primitive cultures and persisted well into late Roman times.

The ruler of this primitive family state is obviously the father — the patriarch. He is king, judge, and priest, the reader of the auguries, holding absolute and complete power. We can think here of the story of Abraham and Isaac: Abraham takes his son off to sacrifice him because he has received a divine message — the gods demand it. What strikes us is how a man could have been prepared to kill his own son. But given this primitive mentality, it is straightforward: the gods demand it, and you do what the gods say, or the thunderbolt finds you. What is even more remarkable, and really supports Vico's

theory, is why the son would go along. The principle was that the father had the right to take any life within the family state that he chose; he was the representative of all authority, divine and secular.

The three principal institutional supports of this stage are religion — the interpretation of the divine message, of divine providence, the notion that all patterns and laws come from above; the burial of the dead — which concerns the notion of immortality, that the soul lives on and, if correctly interred, will return and live again, establishing that the human being is different from all other animals and that primitive man is beginning to develop a sense of his own humanity; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, marriage — the creation of stable family relations in which fathers know who their children are, and which establishes the terms of inheritance. Through marriage, the patriarch produces patrimony. All of these institutions push us out of the animal state.

Vico notes that many theorists had argued for such a primitive early age of man and generally called it the Golden Age — the age when man spoke with God. He will have none of that. The popular mentality of this age was crude and barely ordered, sustained by religions of absolute severity, in which not only does Abraham sacrifice Isaac, but Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to the winds so that he might have a favorable passage to Troy. None of his fellow warriors so much as bats an eye — it is the natural thing to do. This is certainly not a golden age. The mentality of this epoch is crudely physical, based on sense: nature is thought to contain signs about what we ought to do and what the laws are. Walk off on a path and stub your toe — the gods put you there; this is not the right path.

Nevertheless, the obedience of the patriarch and the family state does lead to something important: it prepares people for the next

great stage, the breakthrough to the city-state. That is the **age of heroes**.

This transition goes through two intermediate steps. First, some of the primitive men wandering in the forests — rather than finding religion and heading to the caves — seek refuge from their fellows. There is a war of all against all in those forests, and the weaker individuals, rather than be killed by the stronger, go to those who have left the caves and seek protection in large clearings in the forest called asylums. Vico argues that the founding of Rome was just such an asylum — the land was cleared to afford a clearer view of the sky and allow the reading of divine auspices. The second step is that the patriarchs kill off the violent marauders, and the refugees become their clients. The word for client in Latin — as Vico established through philological analysis — is *famuli*, the root of our word "family." This is not a genetic or biological tie; it is a tie of protection and clientage.

These clearings very quickly become villages, where the patriarch is still king, priest, and father of his *famuli*, his tribe or clan. We might find such a structure among Native American peoples at the moment of contact. The refugees are put to work on the land, which is owned exclusively by the patriarchs. They are denied sacred marriages, so their children are always illegitimate. Because they have no sacred marriages, they have no patrimony — no property that can be inherited.

After the land is settled, this new group of refugees eventually rebels. They are given the first agrarian law, which Vico found in both pre-classical Greece and pre-classical Rome. This agrarian law essentially gives them the status of serfs or peasants — the right to live on and cultivate the land, and to pass it on to their children, provided those children continue to submit and deliver proceeds to the patriarchs.

This social order is feudal — essentially a system of vassalage, a bond of fealty and protection.

What happens next is that the heroic fathers, the patriarchs, unite — on the basis of shared class consciousness and interests — and create heroic or aristocratic commonwealths, found in pre-Republican Rome and Homeric Greece, which are the exclusive domain of the patriarchs, who function simultaneously as magistrates and priests. These patriarchs are now considered heroes — and "hero" means son of the gods. The myth had it that Hercules founded every city in Greece. Vico says we must read that neither as fiction nor as literal history but as mythic history: "Hercules" etymologically means son of the gods, and what it expresses is that the sons of the gods — the patriarchs — founded all the cities.

The human nature of this heroic age is proud and magnanimous, very much like the character of Achilles in the *Iliad* or a chivalric knight. The law is based on exactly worded agreements and contracts, where every specific term must be fulfilled. There is no sense of compassion. The goal of the entire structure is advantage for both sides: the patriarchs seek to extract as much as possible from their serfs and monopolize power, while the clients — now becoming plebeians — seek to improve their condition.

The mentality of this epoch is characterized by imagination and poetic creativity, at least at the outset. This is reflected in the fantastic warrior epics produced during this period — the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata* in the Indian subcontinent, and in Europe the *Song of Roland* and the other great chivalric epics. Toward the end of this stage, however, that poetic creativity — the ability to read things in exclusively analogical and imaginative terms — begins to give way to a more practical rationality, a more law-like understanding of the world.

This emergence of the city-state represents the rise of a nation or civilization, and brings us to the third and final age: the **age of men**.

Slowly but surely, the plebeians continue to fight for their rights. This struggle goes through three stages. In the first, they gain the right to solemnized marriages, which means they can finally have legally recognized family structures that allow them to transmit property to their children. In the second stage, they gain the right to citizenship — initially because they are forced to serve as the foot soldiers for the heroic warriors. Vico's interpretation of statements like "Achilles fought single-handedly against the great forces of Troy" is that Achilles was the only hero fighting; he had his thousands of serfs with him, of course, but he was the only real hero, the only person whose name deserved to be mentioned. However, since military service has such vital value, and once men are armed it is hard to disarm them, they eventually seize the right to become citizens, to be protected by the laws of the state. Finally, they gain the right to hold office in the state.

At that moment, we have seen a fundamental breakthrough in human equality. The age of men as a whole is so called because it recognizes the human equality of all men in light of their shared rationality. For the first time, old traditional laws based on exactly worded agreements are reinterpreted universally as natural laws — laws of reason. High cultural institutions emerge for the first time: academies, as in Athens; philosophy reaches its apogee. This process culminates in the rise of democratic republics and is facilitated by the development of various types of leaders.

The first type is the valorous and just leader — figures like Scipio Africanus or Pericles — who opens the way for popular liberty and fights for the rights of the common soldier. This represents the development of the nation, and the nature of this development is benign: a compassion for all human beings in the society.

Such liberty and democracy are, however, always inherently unstable according to Vico. They inevitably lead to internal divisions and civil war, because class differentiation does not disappear — instead, the different classes are now all politically empowered, the stakes have risen, and the result is always civil conflict. The Greek example is the Peloponnesian War; the Roman example is the terrible civil wars that nearly destroyed Rome after the Punic Wars.

This leads to the second type of leader: the ambitious figure — great men like Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar — who restores order by establishing a monarchy, but one with civil rights. This is the maturity of the culture: despotic in power but ruled by law, and in that sense quasi-republican. After this point, decline sets in. The monarchies are consolidated by reflective, melancholy, and sensitive types, like Tiberius — figures who represent the growing delicacy of the culture's nature. It has become over-refined, soft, and has lost its vigor.

Finally, the culture is destroyed through the next sort of ruler: those who move from delicacy and refinement to complete dissolution and decadence — madmen like Caligula and Nero.

The overall mentality of this period is characterized by reason, but eventually that reason, beginning as practical rationality, becomes purely skeptical and critical. It reaches a point where it begins to critique everything around it as irrational, undermines the possibility of all knowledge, and argues that everything is fundamentally relative — a matter of taste and preference. Philosophy and skeptical reason thus come to replace the socio-cultural glue that is religion. The sacred, which binds a people together in a common project, is displaced in favor of a barren intellectualism. The poetic wisdom and creativity of the age of heroes gives over to a dry, critical, reductive analysis. Legal and social humanism are accompanied by growing decadence: as the laws become more humane, people cease to think

about the public good and are concerned only with their private advantage. Ultimately, the society disintegrates or is overrun from without, ushering in a new barbarism.

I want to turn in my remaining time to the recourse of institutions in the second barbarism. Vico finds this pattern I have just described in ancient Greek civilization, in Rome, and argues it can be found in other cultures as well. Once a culture, a nation, or a people has run its course — its *corso* — it continues to degenerate until it recovers the religious and primal spontaneity of the primitive mind: that fundamental tapping into the well of creativity and psycho-spiritual élan. This contact with the primal spontaneity of the primitive mind is always expressed as contact with God or divine providence. Once that occurs — and we continue to degenerate until it does, perhaps in the form of a religious revival or awakening — the process can begin all over again from the first stage.

Take the example of Rome. Internal war, disaffection, self-interest, and greed on the part of its provincials led to a breakdown of civic spirit, an unwillingness of people to join the Roman army, the recruiting of Germanic barbarians, and ultimately conquest by those same barbarians. When that happened, a new barbarism swept Europe — a dark age. It could only emerge from that darkness and begin its ascent again once it had re-entered an age of the gods. And that is exactly what the early Christian church represents for Vico. The early Christian church heralded a new age of the gods — with auguries in the signs of the heavens, prophecies of the coming kingdom of Christ, the cult of relics, the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore, and so on. There is a return to the primitive, basic mentality of fear and trembling before God.

The next stage, the age of heroes, is represented in medieval Europe. Medieval Europe was a feudal society — a society of clients, where the peasants were individuals who needed protection from warlords,

including in part the very warlords who ostensibly protected them. The heroic aristocrat — now the knight — fulfills the same role that the Homeric hero fulfilled in Homeric Greece. And the only distinction between the medieval knight and his Homeric predecessor is Christianity.

And again, if we think of the great epics written during this second heroic age — epics always being produced during heroic ages — they depict one particular knight fighting an enormous battle. But we know historically the same phenomenon is at work: that knight is not alone on the field; there are hundreds of foot soldiers with him. They are not real people in the eyes of this age; they are not sons of the gods; they do not get represented in the history books. This is not a period of human equality.

Finally, there is the rise of absolutism and the age of reason in the 17th century. For Vico, this announces the next age of men — the age we are presently in. Again, we are turning from traditional feudal laws and canon laws and expanding them into natural laws based on right reason. We are stressing the fundamental equality of man. Vico correctly prophesies the emergence of democratic republics in the fifty years following his writing in 1744. And, of course, we can expect that this new cycle will run its same course.

I want to conclude with the implications of Vico's theory. Each of the three stages represents a different level of development of human mentality: a primitive sensual stage in the age of gods, a poetic and imaginative stage in the age of heroes, and a rational stage in the age of men. Each stage gives rise to its successor.

This scheme can seem pessimistic, in that there is really no way of breaking the cycle — the *corso* must run its course and then its *ricorso*, over and over again. On the other hand, for historians and for those concerned about history, it has dramatic implications. It means that an artifact like Homer's *Iliad*, or heraldic coats of arms, are no

longer merely antiquarian curiosities or mythic narratives. They are in fact sources through which one can reconstruct a distinct previous mentality. We can look at heraldic arms and interpret them: the field represents the field of grain, the gold represents the gold of grain, and the emblems represent the lineage established through the solemnized marriage of the heroic knight. We use historical artifacts not as authorities, but as documents — as windows into interpreting past mentalities.

Another consequence of this doctrine is that, politically, states and institutions must be based on the actual character and cultural development of a nation, not on a utopian scheme. Not all peoples can, at present, sustain a democracy. If a culture is going through its age of heroes, imposing a democracy on it will lead to that democracy being quickly overthrown. Every nation develops according to its own patterns, and there is no room for utopian scheming. The wisest way to structure a government is to be aware of the level of development of the culture and people in question, and from that awareness, apply the appropriate governmental form.

On a broader plane, for Vico, history teaches us the psychological nature of man. It teaches us who we are. It is in fact the true science of man. In it, we see man in three different aspects: a sensual, quasi-brutish creature in the age of gods; a creative, imaginative, and daring figure in the age of heroes; and finally, a rational, fully humane animal in the age of men. Through the study of history, we gain an understanding of what we are, what we have been, and what we are capable of becoming. Thank you very much.

Lecture 4: The High Enlightenment's Cult of Progress — Kant's "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View"

We turn now from the early Enlightenment and its concern with naturalism and the laws of history and of human nature to the late Enlightenment — or what I would call the High Enlightenment: that moment of the Enlightenment most famous for its aspirations, its optimism, and its cult of human perfectibility and progress. I want to examine that cult of progress by examining one essay written in 1784 by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, one of the greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment, who was in many ways a transitional figure between that High Enlightenment and the ensuing age of Romanticism.

But first I want to say something about the High Enlightenment's conception of history. The High Enlightenment is characterized by an incredibly optimistic belief in the growth of human reason and rationality. This outlook held not only that our knowledge of the world was increasing, but that as our knowledge increased, the world was changing with it — becoming a better world, a more humane world, a more rational world, a more progressive world. There was a sense that over the preceding sixty years before Kant's writing there had been a continued improvement in human society, institutions, and moral character: a growth of civility and cultivation among all elements of society, a breakdown of feudal privilege and the Ancien Régime, at least a cursory challenge to the status of women as second-class citizens, the liberation of minorities, and even the

beginning of the anti-slavery movement in North America and England.

Kant wrote not long after the American Revolution, an event which further emboldened the High Enlightenment to believe that the age of despotism, monarchy, inequality, and fundamental irrationality was coming to a close, and that a greater expansion of human freedom and human potential had begun and would continue. In fact, thinkers of this period believed that the only hindrances to such development were superstition and ignorance — that the only reason society had ever failed to live up to the highest possible standards was a lack of knowledge and priestly superstition, neither of which could extinguish the light of reason, which swept all historical relics before it.

The philosophers of the High Enlightenment — in France they were called *philosophes* — thought that progress would be unlimited, that improvement would be unchecked, and that it would result in human and social perfectibility. As reason expanded, institutions would become more and more humane, more and more universal, and ultimately perfect. And as those institutions changed and improved and progressed, man's rational abilities would similarly increase: we would become more educated, more humane, and morally superior to those who had preceded us.

This was a widely held view, and I labored long over the choice of text to represent it. The most famous is from Condorcet, who offered a universal scheme of human progress — and if there is time at the end of this lecture, I will detail part of his scheme. But I chose Kant because his essay is in some ways more accessible: it contains less specific historical information, which means fewer obstacles standing between us and the core of the argument. It also contains many of the elements that would emerge in subsequent Romantic theories of history, in the great philosophies of history of the 19th century.

Kant's piece — a brief essay in this collection called *On History* — takes the form of nine theses: nine principal statements or laws, each followed by explications and supporting arguments. What I will do is present each of these theses, explain them, argue for them, and see what follows from them.

I should note at the outset that Kant sees the end of history — the goal toward which history is developing — as the growth of human reason in human culture and morality. He begins with an assumption very much in keeping with the legacy of the early Enlightenment: that human behavior, like all behavior, is law-like, follows regular sequences of cause and effect, and that these laws are universal and hold across time and space. His goal is first to lay out what some of those laws are, what some of the mechanisms that move history might be, and then to suggest what history's secular trend is. Once we have plotted where these forces have moved us, the next question is: where do they lead us next? Once we have made so much progress to arrive where we are, where will progress lead us in the future? That secular trend — that direction, that goal — is very much the problem Kant poses for himself and attempts to answer in this essay.

Thesis One: *All natural capacities of a creature are destined to evolve completely to their natural end.*

What this means is that every animal, every creature, every species has certain potentialities, certain possible lines of development — the acorn can become the oak tree — and that the system of nature is such that, as a whole, these potentialities will reach their end. That is the reason they have the particular structure that they do. This is obviously a frankly teleological view of nature — a view of nature as moving toward ends — and although it does violence to the anti-Aristotelian, anti-teleological interpretations of the preceding materialism, Kant nonetheless felt he was supported by the facts of

biology. Indeed, if we think about biological entities, we do tend to think of them in terms of their ends, their functions, their purposes, what they develop toward. We think that the human animal does have a natural course of physical development: that given proper nutrition and a proper environment, it will grow from infancy through childhood to maturation and the state of a normal adult.

Kant sees in biology evidence that things are destined to evolve completely to their natural ends. And in fact he argues that without such a teleological interpretation of nature as a regulating principle — as a fundamental structural law underlying the development of our species — history, as well as nature, would be aimless, disjointed, meaningless, and anarchic: one damn thing after another. Without that teleological presupposition, we would have to read history as, in Henry Ford's phrase, bunk. It is only because we can believe that nature leads its various forms of life toward particular ends of development that history has the possibility of taking on a meaningful and progressive developmental pattern.

Thesis Two: *In man, those natural capacities which are directed to the use of his reason are to be fully developed only in the race, not in the individual.*

Starting from the first supposition that every species has all of its capacities developed to their end: is it possible, within one human lifespan, for a person to develop all of the rational faculties to their complete end — to develop a thorough and complete rationality? The answer is obviously no. The reason is that the growth of reason — both as a regulating principle over and against the instincts and as a speculative principle — knows no essential limits, while the human lifespan does have limits. There is a limit to how much we can know and understand in one lifetime. On the other hand, one can imagine, within a culture, a never-ending process of increasing civilization, civility, and cultural expansion, in both breadth and depth.

The shortness of the human lifespan therefore precludes the complete evolution of the capacity for reason demanded by the first thesis within any individual. It is history, then, which is the field within which the capacity of human reason can reach its full and natural end — and this must obviously occur within the species rather than the individual. Thus it is the species, rather than any particular culture, which is the central subject of history for Kant. Hence his use of the term "cosmopolitan" in the title of his essay: *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*.

Thesis Three: *Nature has willed that man should by himself produce everything that goes beyond the mechanical ordering of his animal existence, and that he should partake of no other happiness or perfection than that which he himself, independently of instinct, has created by his own reason*.

That is a big sentence — Germans have a tendency to produce such things. What it means is that all higher or cultural development of mankind is the result solely of his own activity. There is no outside agency that provides breakthroughs or advances. Kant is eliminating God from the pattern of human history. The natural situation of the human species requires that it account for and create its own progress and elevation beyond the merely animal state. If we are to create greater material satisfactions for ourselves, we will have to create them through the deployment of our rational faculties. If we are to create more humane circumstances, societies, states, and civilizations, that will be the result of our own activity and rational forethought.

This is important because Kant wants to argue strongly that the end of human history is not necessarily happiness, but the development of rationality — that happiness is, as it were, the bait that nature uses to force us to develop our rational faculties, our scientific understanding, and our legal and jurisprudential wisdom. It is as if

nature, as he states, "aimed more at his rational self-esteem than at his well-being." We are placed with challenges in the animal state that we cannot contend with unless we develop our rational faculties. One gets a sense here of the exalted, almost overweening sense of pride that the High Enlightenment took in itself and in human capacity and potential — the notion of rational self-esteem, that we could take pride in what we have accomplished and how far we have come and grown and developed and learned, which was part of the excitement of one of the most inspiring moments in modern history.

Another implication of this thesis is that each generation's happiness is the result not of fortuitous circumstances or luck, but of the sacrifices and labors of previous generations — we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, inheriting the legacy of their rational contributions, as they will inherit from us. And it is in that sense — that there is always room to grow, that progress is always infinitely possible until we reach perfectibility — that people are spurred on to greater achievement and improvement.

Thesis Four: *The means employed by nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of man is their antagonism in society, in so far as this is, in the end, the cause of a lawful order among men.*

Kant's argument here is in some ways similar to Adam Smith's arguments about the growth of national wealth. Smith argued that what drives people in business environments is unadulterated greed — the desire to make as much as possible at the expense of one's fellow man. We begin with a very negative impulse: the impulse to acquire as much as possible. And yet if that greed is unfettered and allowed to express itself without the constraints of the state, it will result, through the invisible hand of the market, in the growth of income for every member of society. Starting with a very negative motivation, we arrive at the most positive result: the growth of the

wealth of nations. That is a consequentialist argument, and Kant offers a very similar one here.

It is precisely the fact that humans are fundamentally selfish and antagonistic — that we want to dominate one another and acquire as much as possible from our fellow human beings — that leads us to develop law, morality, statecraft, and universal justice. This universal human selfishness, which would destroy society, precisely because it threatens society, forces us to use our reason to develop these innovations: systems of law, systems of courts, systems of police, systems of justice. Our urge to dominate thus creates our need for humanity. Our innate proclivity to control one another leads to the need for freedom from one another. These base passions are the causes of our higher development, of our movement toward more exalted goals. This is something that Hegel would later call the cunning of reason — reason using the passions for its own advantage to produce greater rationality and progress.

Thesis Five: *The greatest problem for the human race, to the solution of which nature drives man, is the achievement of a universal civic society which administers law among men.*

Only in society can the higher capacities of mankind be fully developed. Living as Robinson Crusoe — when each man is his own poet, philosopher, literary critic, and scientist — the poetry, literary criticism, and science produced is likely to be quite laughable. It is only in the social context that our higher, rational faculties achieve their greatest expression. And it is the freer the society — the greater the liberty within it — that facilitates greater development: the more free play each individual has within society, the greater the expression he or she will be able to make of his or her rational potential, because one will have greater freedom of expression and a greater possibility for experiment and trial.

Civil society must therefore allow for the mutual opposition of its members, since they will always be antagonistic and always seeking to profit from one another, yet must fix the limits of that opposition so that it remains, as Kant says, "consistent with the freedom of others." This is the problem that nature poses to man in society: developing a society in which we are given all the liberty and freedom needed to express our unique capacities and develop them, while limiting that liberty so as not to impinge on the freedoms of others. As we can see, this Kantian conception of balancing liberties and freedoms strongly informs our own constitutional tradition.

The highest problem of history, then, is the development of the perfectly just constitution — one which allows for order and stability, and yet the maximum amount of freedom possible without infringing on the freedom of others. This view was rampant throughout the High Enlightenment. One finds it particularly in North America, where for about twenty years starting around 1776, right through the framing of the federal constitution, tome after tome was written on how to create the ideal, perfect constitution: the perfect frame of government, whether to mix the various elements of society in the government, whether to separate powers, whether there should be a distinct judiciary — all of which finally resulted in the frame of government we now have, largely the work of Madison, Jefferson, and Adams.

In such a society — one in which we have the maximum possible freedom combined with order under a perfectly just constitution — our competitive and aggressive urges, just as in Smith, result in excellence and in progress. Those aggressive urges are sublated: channeled into the form of striving for achievement and adulation through producing excellence, through mechanical invention, poetic innovation, and scientific revolution.

I want to read briefly from Kant, who offers a wonderful analogy for this process: "*It is just the same with trees in a forest. Each needs the others. Since each is seeking to take the air and sunlight from the others, they must strive upward, and thereby each realizes a beautiful, straight stature, while those that live in isolated freedom put out branches at random and grow stunted, crooked, and twisted.*" If there is no constraint, no competition for resources among trees, there is no reason for them to grow erectly, because there is plenty of sunlight. It is only when they must compete — when surrounded by other trees and undergrowth — that they are forced to grow straight and as tall as possible to capture the maximum amount of sunlight.

Thesis Six: *This problem is the most difficult and the last to be solved by mankind.*

Part of the difficulty, as Kant sees it, is the selfish nature of man, which makes it highly likely that any government we could create — any perfect constitution, any magistracy — once created, will abuse its power. Kant, for all his optimism, is acutely aware that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is the greatest obstacle we must overcome, because that same antagonistic nature which drives our progress cannot simply be trusted: one cannot trust a magistrate with authority if that authority is unchecked. That is part of the reason we need to develop governments of law, not of men.

Kant sees three essential requirements for the solution of this problem in history. The first is a correct conception of a possible commonwealth — which requires political and scientific research, including perhaps a ransacking of the histories of previous peoples. How have mixed governments worked? What have been the results of the British Parliament, the French Parliament, the Polish Diet? How has the separation of powers worked in various contexts? Here Kant draws on a rich tradition of such speculation from thinkers like Montesquieu, Vico, Hume, Pufendorf, and Grotius. Such theoretical

research into political and social science gives us an understanding of what will work under what circumstances and what is the best form of government, the best mixture of powers, institutions, and social elements.

The second requirement is practical knowledge — not theoretical knowledge, but knowledge from experience, from trial and error. If we think a mixed government that brings in the various elements of society is best, let us look at four examples of such governments. When they have worked, what caused them to work? When they have not, what stood in the way? It also means trial and error in our own cases. To draw an example: the government of Pennsylvania during the Revolution concluded that the most democratic form of government was best and instituted a unicameral assembly — one legislative body holding all the power, with a nearly powerless governor. This was an experiment in the most democratic system of government. It did not work. They eventually repealed it and replaced it with a bicameral system with a much stronger governor. This is one of the requirements: we must be willing to experiment — not through putsches and coups d'état, but rather through a rational capacity to say, let us try a unicameral scheme, and if it does not work, change it.

This is not unique to Kant. If we think about our own frame of government, the provision allowing for constitutional amendment is clearly designed with exactly that realization in mind: some of the provisions we have now may not work; let us try them; if they do not, there is a mechanism for change. The very existence of our current Constitution is an example. We did have a prior constitution — the Articles of Confederation. They tried it. It did not work. Back to the drawing board, and progress. And that is, of course, where history becomes a practical science for Kant: in the past we can find examples of trial and error, just as we can in the present and future.

The third and final requirement is, as Kant writes, "a good will ready to accept such a constitution" — not only a conceptual understanding of what will work, and a practical awareness of what has worked, but the desire, the goal, and the disinterested patriotism and civic-mindedness of the society to put such a thing in place and to live according to its dictates. There was just such a moment for us at the founding of our nation. And yet no sooner had our Constitution been established than people on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line accused each other of not having that good will, a conflict which ultimately resulted in the most bloody carnage in American history: the Civil War, following forty years of internal political division.

Kant is not naïve about this. He is almost prophetic. He is aware that this is not an easy project — that people will always try to place their self-interest above the good will required for a perfectly just civic constitution. It is for that reason that he is acutely aware this project may take quite a long time, and that humanity may have to learn the error of self-interested action through many failures and disappointments.

Thesis Seven: *The problem of establishing a perfect civic constitution is dependent upon the problem of lawful external relations among states and cannot be solved without a solution of the latter problem.*

Here we return to his cosmopolitanism. It was asocial antagonisms among individuals that produced the need for society in the first place. The same relation we find among individuals with respect to society can be found among states with respect to the international order — where we conceive of individual governments and nations taking the place of individual persons. The same needs that created lawful civic justice among men can be seen in the relationship between nation-states. The equivalent, for states, of a lawful civil

society among individuals is obviously a global community or global league of nations.

Kant was visionary here, and this is part of the cosmopolitan charm of the Enlightenment. He actually worked out a plan for a League of Nations — approximately fourteen points in length. Who read it? Woodrow Wilson. That is where Wilson's League of Nations came from. Kant's plan included provisions for the self-determination of peoples, democratic republics, freedom of the seas — all of the principles we now think of as informing our best hopes for international order.

Kant sees that we cannot solve the problem of a civic constitution for each individual state until there is a global order, and he is quite right: if there is no global order, you may have the perfect civic constitution and yet be quickly overrun by other nations and find that constitution destroyed. He writes of this league of nations that "even the smallest state could expect security and justice, not from its own power and by its own decrees, but only from this great league of nations, from a united power, acting according to decisions reached under the laws of the united will." Remarkably, if you replace "league of nations" with "civic society" and "nations" with "individuals," that sentence characterizes perfectly the way our own society functions — where even the weakest and smallest has a say and has power, not because of personal ability, but because of the universal extension of rights to all, independent of wealth or social status.

We need, as it were, an international republic. And Kant argues that however utopian this may seem, there are already historical dynamics leading toward it. Each war undermines the international order. Just as social struggles weaken the existing order of the civil state, and internal dissensions undermine a nation until it reaches a state of stability, the same thing will occur in the relations among

nations: as disorders and wars occur, there is a natural tendency among nations, as there is among individuals, to try to establish a new and more stable order, to learn from the mistakes of the last generation.

In fact, Kant argues that any truly moral order is impossible until this institution — a global league of nations — is created. Consider the vast resources that every society must waste, simply to protect itself, on militarism: those same resources could otherwise be used for scientific research, for education, for cultural improvement, for public health, for free schooling, for general social uplift and improvement. One cannot have a truly moral society until we are able to cease channeling those resources into unproductive lines and direct them instead toward paths of progress and development.

Thesis Eight: *The history of mankind can be seen in the large as the realization of nature's secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also to bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end.*

Kant's argument is that the present competition and antagonism between states gives us reason to believe that the course of development he has sketched — toward a universal cosmopolitan league of nations and perfectly just civic constitutions — is in fact possible and likely. Why? Because competition among states requires that each government, if it pursues its self-interest — and here the Smithian analogy returns — must attempt to foster cultural development, since it is that cultural development which leads to innovation and technical and scientific breakthroughs, which even from a purely militaristic standpoint reap enormous dividends. Every state must therefore try to foster its cultural development simply to keep up with its competitors and neighbors. And thus the self-

interest of rulers results in the promotion of ever greater enlightenment.

Similarly, Kant notes, commercial development — the growth of the wealth of nations — is an important principle and means of power by which a government is able to sustain itself, even with the worst purely militaristic motivations. The government requires revenue to fund its military, and it can only obtain that revenue from taxes on commerce. If it taxes property in the wrong way, it will have a revolution on its hands, as Americans once discovered. The notion is that a government must constantly foster commercial development — through excise taxes and the general growth of national wealth — or it will fall behind its neighbors and be unable to protect itself.

At the same time, commercial development cannot thrive within an authoritarian structure. People only take risks when they know they have at least the possibility of reaping rewards. There must be a certain degree of freedom — of trade, of expression — to foster commercial development, and that freedom turns out itself to be a great source of power for rulers. So even rulers with the worst motivations, simply following their self-interest, cannot afford to infringe civil freedom without jeopardizing commerce. Freedom thus spreads by degrees. As Kant writes, "limitations of personal actions are step by step removed," and general religious freedom is permitted — because without it, merchants from different nations cannot come to your city and establish trading houses, and your commerce will suffer. He continues: "Enlightenment comes gradually, with intermittent folly and caprice, as a great good which must finally save men from the selfish aggrandizement of their masters, always assuming that the latter know their own interest."

As long as rulers know where their bread is buttered — as long as they know and pursue their self-interest — the result will always be a greater expansion of human freedom and liberty. The international

nature of commerce, which had already emerged by the late 18th century and certainly exists in our present global economy, means that every nation and state has an interest in seeing all civil disturbances and revolutions arbitrated peacefully, simply because revolution disrupts the flow of commerce and may lead to the loss or seizure of property. This lays the groundwork for an international order that will attempt to arbitrate such disputes. And in fact, that is what is occurring: Kant has been prophetic in many ways. When struggles occur around the world — revolutions, civil wars — the international community almost always tries to arbitrate, and not necessarily from humanitarian principles, but from self-interested ones. It is good for trade; it is good for international stability; it is in every nation's interest to prevent disruptive revolutions elsewhere.

Thesis Nine: *A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history according to a natural plan directed to achieving the civic union of the human race must be regarded as possible, and indeed as contributing to this end of nature.*

Two things are being said here. First, it must be possible to work out this conception — this model, which Kant believes he has sketched in these nine theses — because if it is rational and real, it must be comprehensible, scientifically capable of analysis and exposition. Second, such a work will actually contribute to the development of this state of affairs. Simply becoming aware of a work such as Kant's inspires us, urges us to reflect on the nature of our institutions both nationally and internationally, points out a possible line of action, a way of resolving disorders within our own society and within the international community.

A study of constitutions from ancient Greece through Rome to the present shows, for Kant, a continuous progress in Europe: each constitution is more humane than the one before it. Being aware of that and having it laid out before us makes us jealous to guard that

progress and ensure it does not backslide. It is that awareness and exposition of principles which leads people to refuse to allow their masters to act in ways that limit their freedom. To draw a vivid analogy: one of the things that surprised many people in the United States when the Iron Curtain fell was how profoundly people behind it had depended on Radio Free Europe and the transmission of our so-called propaganda. It had been an incredibly inspiring source to them — it gave them a vision of another possible world.

This development within Europe — increasing constitutionality, increasing legality, the breakdown of despotism followed by the breakdown of feudal privilege, the growth of civic equality — Kant believed would continue to develop. We know from other Enlightenment thinkers, like Mary Wollstonecraft, that there were other things still to be done: a vindication of the rights of women to come, a vindication of the rights of ethnic and racial minorities. Kant believed that from Europe this law and this progress would be brought to the rest of the world — that Europe would be a beacon to the globe, bringing to it constitutional republics, civil society based on law, liberty, and freedom, and international order.

Such a progressive view of history offers us, beyond a law-like comprehension of the past, a comforting prospect for the future. It gives us a reason to believe that the future may, in fact, be even better than the present — a reason to aspire, to feel confidence about what may follow us and what will be the lot of our children and grandchildren. It is also not only a concern for the future but a consolation in the present: it gives us a sense of satisfaction in knowing that we have done our part well, that we have helped history move forward. And quite obviously, it offers a plan of action. Once we have a sense of where we have been and where we are going, we know what the next steps are. We know what the next plans are, and we have a strong motive to pursue them.

I want to conclude with some remarks that are both appreciative and critical of the High Enlightenment's optimistic belief in unlimited progress. First of all, that faith required a very selective view of history. To believe that history is one story of constant progress from ancient Rome to late 18th-century Europe, one must turn a blind eye to the hideous religious wars of the 17th century, during which the rivers of the German Palatinate ran red with blood — just incredible carnage. It also meant ignoring the Dark Ages. A narrative of progress from Rome to the Enlightenment had to skip over the period Vico called the Second Barbarism — the centuries following the fall of Rome during which universities were abolished across Europe, literacy declined, and people returned to a much more primitive, nearly Neolithic village life.

This selective vision also did violence to our understanding of the past. By seeing history in purely progressive terms, anything that did not fit the progressive scheme — medieval Europe, for instance — was dismissed as superstition, as the rule of priests, as nonsense and gibberish. This meant that one could never understand sympathetically what the mentality or culture of that epoch truly was. The result is that the High Enlightenment produced virtually no histories of medieval Europe. They did history of Greece and Rome — Gibbon gave us perhaps the classic exposition of Rome's decline — and then history picks up again with the Renaissance and jumps forward to the Age of Reason. Huge swaths of history are simply lost because they do not fit the scheme.

As bad as that is for our understanding of the past — and as a historian it concerns me greatly — it may in fact have been even worse for our understanding of the future. It made the thinkers of the High Enlightenment incredibly short-sighted. Nothing dramatizes this more than the event to which Kant attached almost cosmic significance: the French Revolution. The French Revolution produced

every bit as much terror as it did enlightenment. Its fighting for the rights of man came at the price and by the means of the guillotine, and the terror — both red and white — that followed was absolutely horrific. That short-sightedness about the potential for breakdown and disaster was what I would call the blind side of the Enlightenment's cult of progress. And what did the French Revolution finally result in? Not the rights of man, but the creation of Napoleon's empire and its reactionary aftermath in the hands of Metternich and Talleyrand. It contributed far more to those things than it did to any genuine growth in the rights of man.

Having said all that, I want to be fair and acknowledge that the Enlightenment's cult of progress has remained an important and enduring legacy. It is a legacy that has inspired many progressive movements — the very name "progressive" comes from that moment. It has inspired revolutionary and radical movements that have genuinely expanded human freedom — things like the League of Nations, movements for civil rights, goals of equality and humanity. That is the legacy which the High Enlightenment has left us, and it is one we continue to grapple with today.

Lecture 5: Hegel's Philosophy of History

We are now going to examine what is, in many ways, probably the most difficult, challenging, exciting, and important thinker in the recent philosophy of history — a thinker who, more than any other philosopher or theorist, put the philosophy of history and history itself on the map. I speak, of course, of Hegel: G.W.F. Hegel, the German idealist philosopher of the 19th century, one of the great thinkers of the Romantic epoch, and perhaps the most deep and profound thinker on the problem of history and its philosophical significance. He is in many ways the father of modern historicism and idealism.

Hegel used history — or saw in history — a counterexample to the mechanistic materialism of the Enlightenment. We mentioned previously that the Enlightenment saw Newtonian science and the scientific method, the materialist or mechanistic analysis of nature and society, as the most crucial, critical, and most dependable way of gaining knowledge about the world. That was not only a methodological belief but a metaphysical one, which means that Enlightenment thinkers not only thought that this was the best method, but that the world really was machine-like in its structure — that it was law-like, driven by a sort of mechanical necessity, by simple, straightforward mathematical causal laws.

Hegel was the first to see in history the great exception to that rule, the great counterexample. And of course, as any good philosopher knows, exceptions do not prove rules — they disprove them. They show that rules are inadequate. Hegel showed that one could not offer a law-like, mechanistic analysis or theory that would explain historical change. What was the law that produced Michelangelo's paintings? What was the mechanism that resulted in the growth of Baroque styles? Posing those questions leaves a very trenchant

silence. There is no law — precisely because history is, at least for Hegel, a realm in which natural laws do not obtain, in which the human spirit, human rationality, and human culture — all of which are predicated on a certain form of freedom — have their play.

Historicism and Idealism

Having established that Hegel is, as it were, the answer to the Enlightenment, and finds in history the great counterexample to its cult of science and mechanism, I want to discuss very briefly what we mean by historicism and idealism, the two most obvious descriptions of Hegel's philosophy of history.

Historicism is the doctrine that there is no extra-historical, logical, or epistemological criterion for judging a culture — that every culture is relative to its specific moment, to its specific level of development, and that it has its own internal, coherent criterion of criticism and judgment. Hegel's historicism lies in his realization that history does not exemplify mathematical laws of the kind found in physics, but is rather developmental: the standards and parameters of action change over time. Part of this includes the notion that there is no fixed human nature — that the sort of character one would find in a Greek or Roman, contrary to what Hume had argued, is nothing like the character of an Englishman or a Frenchman. As we will see, the notion of national character turns out to be a very critical notion in Hegel's thinking.

Why is Hegel an idealist? What do we mean by idealism? Hegel is an idealist because what he finds developing over time is intelligence — is culture, which he conceives of as mind, or what he actually calls spirit. It is our ideas, our culture, our mentality which develop in history and in biography. That is the part of our nature, and the part of the world, with which the historian is concerned. And the crucial element of idealism — the point that Hegel is trying to stress — is that mind and culture are not only quantitatively different from

nature but qualitatively different. They reside in a distinct metaphysical realm, one in which there are different laws of development, different laws of explanation, and different patterns of causation.

There are, as it were, two worlds, or two realms within our world. There is the realm of nature, of *physis*, of material things standing in a precise causal nexus described by Newton. And then there is the world of spirit, which develops along entirely different lines and is the realm of consciousness, freedom, and — as we will see — dialectical development.

The Four Sentences

Hegel's philosophy of history is challenging because it is one of the most impenetrable doctrines imaginable. What makes it all the more frustrating is that it is also, in some ways, very straightforward and simple. Once you understand the entire system, you could describe or characterize all of Hegel's philosophy of history in four sentences. I want to read them to you.

The first is that history is the dialectical process whereby spirit comes to know itself and realizes its idea. Freedom is the idea of spirit, and spirit is reason in and for itself. The means of this realization — or, to use one of his famous phrases, the cunning of reason — is the passions of the individual as both subject and object of history, and its form is the state. The national spirit is a moment in the development of the world spirit. And for each such moment, as for all, the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the setting of dusk.

Those four sentences are a quick summation of an entire philosophy, and I assume they are thoroughly incomprehensible to each of you. The reason they are is that Hegel is a profoundly, painfully systematic thinker in the sense that his entire philosophy comprises what he called an absolute perspective. Once one has read all of his works and understands the absolute perspective, everything becomes

intuitive, straightforward, and easy as pie. Until you have the absolute perspective, nothing makes any sense whatsoever. Which, of course, is a great defense for Hegelians: if you ever disagree with Hegel or claim not to understand something, it is because you have not read everything he ever wrote or studied all the notes that his students took of his lectures. And in fact, the text we are looking at today, *Reason in History*, is a compilation of just such student notes from his lectures.

I would argue that the reason these sentences are so impenetrable is that they comprise the expression of a unique and systematic vocabulary. Hegel uses words in ways we are not accustomed to seeing them used. They are spelled the same and sound the same as words we know, but they are in fact technical vocabulary for Hegel, and they all interlock in a very tight structure which can be compared to the squares of a Rubik's cube: unless you know the exact formula that puts them all together, it becomes gibberish; once you do, it becomes simple and straightforward. What I would like to do, then, is unpack each of these sentences — translate the terms into something closer to the English we all know and love — and hopefully from that arrive at a sense of the scope, range, and problems that Hegel is trying to deal with.

Unpacking the First Sentence: Dialectic and Spirit

Let us begin with the first sentence: *History is the dialectical process whereby spirit comes to know itself and realizes its idea*.

By history, Hegel always means world history. He is interested in the whole, in the absolute, in the largest possible temporal and spatial frame imaginable. He sees all of world history as a whole, moving in one direction.

What is a dialectical process? What is the dialectic? This is a word that Hegelians and crypto-Hegelians like Marxists throw around constantly, and it tends to leave people confused. It is a model of

explanation and logic that Hegel invented. You may know the famous expression: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Those are the moments of the Hegelian dialectic. The best way to give you a brief explanation is through a couple of examples.

The classic formulation of the thesis and antithesis is called undifferentiated unity, differentiated disunity, and differentiated unity. What does that mean? Let us take an example of undifferentiated unity. That means a set of relations in which various entities are held together without any awareness of their disparate natures, bound by a sort of primordial, unconscious glue. An excellent example in terms of human relations is the family. The family is an example of undifferentiated unity. The bond that holds people together is natural affection and love. What is the father's is the wife's; what is the wife's is the child's. We are all willing to sacrifice for each other without thinking, without duty, without demand, because it is a natural, affectionate relationship. For that reason, it is a unity, and it is undifferentiated: each for all and all for each.

What, then, would be differentiated disunity? That would be the atomic individual in civil society. In everyday economic and business life, it is each man for himself. Everyone is responsible for his own behavior, and everyone competes with everyone else for excellence and the rewards that come with it. We have a case of differentiated, in the sense that each individual is treated as exactly that — as an individual — and comes to think of himself as an individual; and disunity, in the sense that it is a competitive and to some extent antagonistic set of relations.

And what would be the synthesis of these two? The undifferentiated unity of the family, the bond of affection; and the complete atomism of civil society: the synthesis is differentiated unity, which Hegel finds in the state. In the government, the state, the system of laws, we do

still have differentiation — we are still discrete individual entities with our own interests and goals — but they are unified under a common set of norms, laws, and practices which dictate our civic responsibility and therefore our civic morality. That is one example of thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

Another example is what Hegel calls sensuous consciousness — basically the phenomenal awareness of your physical states: states of pain, pleasure, hunger. Its antithesis is understanding, the sort of abstract rationality one finds in mathematics, physics, and various other sciences. The synthesis of the two is what he calls reason, which is an abstract rationality that nonetheless comprehends the whole — that sees as part of itself the phenomenal experiences, emotions, drives, and desires, subsuming them all under a larger structure.

Now to the next critical word in that sentence: spirit. By spirit, Hegel means the world spirit. The world spirit is the agent, the subject of history. This is a very strange notion, because it is a way of speaking we have largely given up. The best way to think of the world spirit is as a collective subject, or a super-person, that is immanent in a people. In each particular moment, the world spirit takes the form of a national spirit: that underlying set of principles, or that super-historical person, immanent in the people of a given nation who share a distinct character and a distinct set of traits.

As much as that may sound like an absurd generality to us today, we nonetheless still believe that there are different characters to different nations. We know that Germans have a much more profound sense of authority than do Englishmen, who have a much more profound sense of class structure than Americans — whom everyone outside America knows to be bumptious, energetic, and extremely egalitarian. The Scots are said to have a penchant for shrewd business dealings and parsimony. It is exactly those sorts of

character traits that Hegel sees as the immanent reflection of this larger personality: the spirit of the nation.

We still use this notion in various ways in our legal practices. Consider: when we take someone to court for a criminal offense, the case is always, say, *Jeffrey Dahmer v. the United States*, or in constitutional cases such as *United States v. Schenck*. In such cases, the United States is a super-person — an agent capable of legal personality, of suing and being sued, of bringing charges. We use this kind of language all the time when we talk about the United States negotiating a GATT treaty. In fact, it is a handful of individuals who negotiate such a treaty, but they represent — or better yet, they *are* the representatives of — the nation. That is the same structure of posit that Hegel is using when he speaks of the world spirit and national spirits.

Two more words remain in that first sentence. What does *realize* mean? By this Hegel means to make real, or to make actual as opposed to potential. We know, for example, that a child is potentially an adult if given the correct nurturance, food, and medical attention. Hegel would say that, given those things, the child will realize its adulthood — will actualize its ultimate end, that of being a full adult.

Finally, the word *idea*. This is a very particular use of the word for Hegel. By the idea of spirit, he means the essence of spirit. And by essence he means not merely what characterizes a thing, but also essence in a teleological sense: that toward which the thing is developing, its end, its natural and highest characterization.

The Second Sentence: Freedom and Reason

Freedom is the idea of spirit, and spirit is reason in and for itself.

Since we know that idea means essence, freedom is the essence of spirit — the end toward which it moves. What is reason? For Hegel,

reason is abstract rationality, structure, order, or intelligence. It is the philosophical expression of what religious people call God: the sort of immanent rationality or logic behind the veil of events and realities.

Hegel tags this abstract quality of reason — reason disembodied from concrete manifestations — as reason *in itself*. Its dialectical antithesis, reason *out of itself*, Hegel considers to be nature. Why? Because nature is in fact rational — we know this because it can be modeled by mathematical laws. There is an immanent rationality to the universe and the physical realities within which we live, but nature is simultaneously *out of itself* because it is unaware that it is rational. It follows laws — of gravitation and various other kinds — in a rational fashion, but without any awareness that it is following those laws. Hence, *out of itself*.

What, then, is the synthesis of reason in itself and reason out of itself? It is spirit — the collective mind of man, conceived of as a collective super-person. Man is the synthesis because he is a natural animal who obeys laws just as the rest of nature does, but is also capable of being conscious of his own rationality, and therefore of having self-awareness of his rational nature. Spirit, then, is reason *in and for itself*.

Finally, what is freedom — the end toward which history moves? It is not what you will think at first. It is not the British idea of liberty: freedom from restraint, freedom from interference, liberty from government or other individuals. Rather, freedom is acting according to the dictates of your own nature — which for Hegel, as for any great German philosopher following Kant, will always mean following the dictates of a conscious reason capable of dictating universal laws according to, as it were, a categorical imperative. What he means by freedom is not liberty but Kantian autonomy. *Autonomy* — from *autonomos*, self-lawmaking — means that we are free insofar as we

follow laws that come from our own rational nature and that we have made by our own rational nature. That is not to say that each individual has made those laws or even consciously agrees with them. Like Rousseau, Hegel believed that very often people must be forced to be free.

The Third Sentence: The Cunning of Reason, the Individual, and the State

The means of this realization, or the cunning of reason, is the passions of the individual as both subject and object of history, and its form is the state.

For Hegel, passion means nothing more than self-interested action — a self-interested drive that seizes the will, takes control of the personality, and prompts the individual to act in a particular way. In a healthy state, such passion always works toward the betterment of society as a whole and the common good. That is the sign of a healthy and evolved state. It is not necessarily exalted emotion; it is simply acting on the basis of self-interest.

What does it mean for Hegel to speak of the individual as the *subject* of history? Here he speaks of what we might call the great man — world's-historical individuals who make a profound difference in the course of history, who have fundamentally changed moralities, national principles, and systems of law. We might think of Caesar, Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Martin Luther. These figures all arise out of a particular situation. As a nation develops, it outgrows its mores. It changes to a point where the laws and institutions it once had no longer fulfill its changing patterns of behavior, aspirations, and goals. As a result, the nation becomes bogged down. This problem is solved by the emergence of world's-historical individuals who move the world spirit forward by sacrificing their happiness to their passions — that is to say, because they immanently represent

the logic of the moment, they do the things necessary to bring history forward.

Caesar creates the great world empire and begins the process of extending citizenship to the provincials. Napoleon brings parliamentary law and the end of feudal structure to all of Europe. Note that neither of them does this because he thinks these things are good in themselves. Caesar doesn't undertake his reforms because he thinks they are right — he does it because he wants power, because he wants to dominate, because he is furious that Pompey has tried to remove him from the Senate, and because he intends to become the great dictator of Rome. Precisely because he wants to achieve those things, he must do those positive acts, since that is the only way he can stabilize his rule. Similarly with Napoleon: he does not extend law and civil equality, or liberate minorities, because he believes in those things for their own sake — it is necessary if he wants to become the emperor of all of Europe. The historical moment dictates it.

And the result of such world's-historical individuals, according to Hegel, is always tragic. They do great deeds, always for the most selfish of reasons, and suffer greatly — they never achieve happiness. That is in fact part of the cunning of reason: reason, or spirit, uses great men to advance itself when their motives are almost always selfish, greedy, and practical. The practical comes to serve the ideal as spirit moves toward higher and more exalted expressions of self-lawmaking rationality.

What about the individual as *object* of history? This is a very hard doctrine of Hegel's, but one which suggests his realism and fair-mindedness. The individual as object is most of us — the private individual, the person who is not a world's-historical figure. We are not the makers of history; we are, according to Hegel, its victims. History happens to us. Hegel is acutely aware that for most people,

history is a calamity. The things that happen to us that are historical are wars, famines, plagues, diseases, conjunctures of tragic proportions that produce cataclysmic changes. Those changes are always positive from the perspective of spirit, but the individuals who suffer them always feel the pain. Hegel is aware that this is a hard doctrine, but it is another dimension of the cunning of reason: spirit never suffers for its own growth. Its growth is always dynamic, coming through conflict, while spirit itself does not suffer — we suffer for it.

Finally, what does Hegel mean by the *state*? There are two senses to it. What we ordinarily mean by the state are the institutions of government — coercive instrumentalities that codify behaviors, restrict some behaviors, and protect the rights of some when they come at the expense of others. Hegel includes that, but means more than it. When he uses the word state, he means as well the culture of a people, the spirit and characteristics that unify them as a particular kind of people. The state — which he sees as the organizing principle of the nation — allows for the integration of the individual within civil society in a civil way. So for Hegel, the state, which is both the government and something more than the government — the mores, norms, culture, and beliefs of a nation — is the highest expression of the development of the world spirit.

It is within the state, as I have mentioned before, that the family and civil society — the first two parts of that three-part synthesis — can be preserved, each contributing its part to the development of morality and law. The state, in turn, is the foundation for religion, art, and science and philosophy.

In religion, Hegel thinks we find spirit expressed in an emotional form: spirit becomes emotionally aware of absolute spirit through religion. The notion of God, of a transcendental deity of some kind, is an emotional and figurative way of characterizing the truth of

absolute reason or the world spirit. In art, we find another development in the expression of the absolute, because here the idea of the deity is represented in some physical manifestation. With art there is a movement away from the purely emotional apprehension of religion toward a symbolic and representational apprehension, whether through sculpture, Gothic painting, cathedral architecture, or any other medium. And finally, with philosophy, the union with spirit — whose religious expression is the word God — is achieved through thought and reflection.

These three elements — religion, art, and philosophy — constitute the essence of the state or of a culture. For Hegel, however, religion is the most basic. Thus Rome and Greece are defined by their forms of paganism, which distinguishes them from other states with their own distinct forms of paganism — the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Carthaginians. Similarly, he thinks the difference between Protestant and Catholic countries is a function of religion. The Catholic religion represents the deity in a far more authoritarian fashion, one which replicates an earthly retinue of hierarchies within the church structure. In Protestantism, by contrast, the relationship to God is much more direct: each man stands before God in the priesthood of all believers. It is for that reason that he thinks Protestant religions — and therefore Protestant countries — are far more liberal, with a greater degree of individual freedom and parliamentary government than Catholic countries had attained, at least in his time.

The Fourth Sentence: The National Spirit, the World Spirit, and the Owl of Minerva

The national spirit is a moment in the development of the world spirit. And for each such moment, as for all, the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the setting of dusk.

Spirit comes to an awareness of its essential freedom — of the fact that it follows laws it makes for itself — in the minds of men. We mentioned that spirit is a super-person, a collective subject, in the same way the United States is a collective subject in a legal proceeding. That is not to say that the United States could exist without the people of the United States, any more than spirit could exist without the people who collectively constitute it. In the same way that the United States wins its victories on the battlefield through the individual soldiers that make up its army, spirit comes to awareness of its essential freedom through the minds of the individuals who make up the nation within which the spirit is residing at that moment. These individuals come to an awareness of their essential freedom through their actions in spirit's antithesis — nature. It is by acting through nature that we come to understand how different we are from nature. As we train our dogs, we realize that we are not dogs — that we are not simply animals that can be taught through stimulus and response, that there is something developmental, intellectual, and cognitive involved in human development that has no parallel in our experience of the physical world.

Each stage of this growing awareness of our freedom is exemplified in a particular people or nation that at that moment is the highest expression of the world spirit. And at that moment, that nation will always be the most thoroughgoing self-consciousness of freedom. This must begin with the state, which is why Hegel argues that history only begins with organized political communities. It is only there that we can begin to actually postulate law, and once law is postulated we can see the beginning of the sense of freedom — acting according to dictates that we have made ourselves. Moreover, only in those contexts can there be morality. Unless there is law, unless some set of procedures and behaviors are prescribed, one is not blameworthy for failing to follow them. Hegel does not believe in

a natural law or in some disembodied, universalizable moral principles. He is a strict historicist: the law is what the law says at any particular moment; morality is what it is at any particular moment of evolution; there is no final perspective from which we can render a timeless judgment.

Hegel's Thumbnail Sketch of History

I will now give you very briefly Hegel's sketch of world history. I do not stress it very heavily because his historical knowledge is quite sketchy — it is the scheme that is important for Hegel, and the scheme that is adopted by subsequent Hegelians and Marxists.

He begins with Oriental civilizations — the civilizations of the Far East, the Near East, and the Middle East. That is the beginning of history for him, as it is for everyone, with Sumer. But he argues that these civilizations never quite come to understand the freedom of man. The Oriental despotisms one finds in ancient Egypt, Sumer, China, or India were thought to be natural or cosmogonic in character, and this is in fact historically accurate. The first pharaohs were thought to be representatives or incarnations of the god, as were probably the first priestly kings of Sumer. The emperor of China always ruled under the Mandate of Heaven, and the emperor of Japan is still thought, to some extent, to be related to the divine. What these civilizations understood was that *one* person was free — that being the ruler. He followed rules he made for himself. Yet even this is not complete freedom — it is a sketchy freedom, barely emerging from nature, the freedom of a capricious despot. That capricious despot, because there are no abstract laws in the society, is likely to follow his whims and passions. And that is not freedom in the sense of autonomy but its opposite — in Kantian language, heteronomy: following dictates which are not created by you. If you desire wealth and act to pursue wealth, that is not freedom or

autonomy; the wealth is dictating your behavior, something external to you, not a rational rule you have made for yourself.

The Greeks and Romans, then, were for Hegel the first to really understand freedom, but only partially. In Greek civilization, *some* are free. This is reflected in the fact that the Greek commonwealths were generally aristocracies. Even when they were democracies, as in Athens, we are only talking about the democracy of the citizens — perhaps one in twelve people, with the vast majority being slaves. Hegel recognizes that we are getting a genuine sense of freedom here, but it is the freedom only of a few — those who are citizens, those who have through military service or ethnic background participated meaningfully in the state. They are free, but not man as such — only man as citizen.

Finally, it is only with the Germanic peoples — and by Germanic Hegel means very broadly everyone in northern Europe — and through Christianity that we come to realize that *all* men are free. Christianity teaches the universal brotherhood of mankind, and this becomes exemplified in the fact that in the Germanic cultures of England, Germany, and Scandinavia, citizenship is extended to all men: all men have equal protection under the laws, all men have equal dignity. The earliest representation of this was the religious ideology of Christianity itself — that all men are equal brothers.

The Owl of Minerva

Finally, I want to address the last part of that sentence: that strange locution about the owl of Minerva. It is a paraphrase — Hegel's actual formulation is quite a bit longer, involving the image of gray on gray in the dusk — but the owl is the symbol of wisdom. For Hegel, it symbolizes historical understanding: the awareness of what was really going on in a particular historical epoch and what that epoch means. And that awareness only comes, he says, with the

setting of dusk — when that epoch is over. You cannot understand a historical process until that process has come to an end.

A spirit which can only understand itself after it has finished its actions could be exemplified in the great Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, who finally arrive at a complete and rigorous understanding of the nature of Greek society. Why? Because Greek society has run its course. The Peloponnesian War is over and done with. The Greek society of the *polis*, which they have now come to understand, is already a historical artifact — succeeded by the Macedonian Empire and never to be recovered.

Consequences of Hegel's Philosophy

I hope you now have a sense of the large-scale goals Hegel had in mind. I want briefly to discuss some of the consequences of his philosophy.

Historicism is certainly a much more sophisticated way of understanding the human past and human societies. It is the awareness that not only did someone like Shakespeare speak differently from us, but that his mentality and culture were different from ours as well. He did not share the same human nature that we do, nor did he share the human nature of a Neolithic village dweller or a Paleolithic hunter. Something fundamental changes in humanity as its culture, mores, norms, and beliefs change, as its mentality changes. That transformation is in a way an essential change in humans, not merely a surface one.

At the same time, historicism can lead to historical relativism. Consider: if we have no specific conception of any absolute reason in itself, but only of reason as it comes to its historical development, then all we have for understanding reason, morality, law, and right and wrong is its particular level of historical evolution as embodied in our national spirit. The world spirit starts out with Oriental civilizations, then moves — once it has achieved all it can there — to

the Greek city-state, then to the Germanic peoples, developing itself ever more fully. What this means is that one cannot criticize the practices of Oriental despotism from the perspective of our beliefs in universal freedom, precisely because those beliefs are the result of a later historical development. To apply them to an earlier period is an anachronism. There is therefore no frame of judgment beyond that of the historical moment within which you live. This applies not only to morality but to the very canons of rationality itself, which shift as the world spirit moves from one people to another.

This can be a very troubling doctrine. Hegel would deny us any wisdom in judging our ancestors critically for their treatment of Native Americans, for example. He would say that is a naïve view — that was not how people saw things then; spirit has grown since then; it was in fact the struggle involved in that treatment that dialectically created the wisdom of recognizing it as wrong. But at the time, it was not wrong in any sense the spirit could yet recognize. It was the level of understanding spirit had reached at that moment.

Another consequence of Hegel's philosophy is that it can be politically conservative, nationalistic, militaristic, and statist. This is precisely why the conservative nationalist Prussian state paid him to lecture publicly: he was, in fact, the Prussian court philosopher. There had been student uprisings by radicals seeking parliamentary reform, and they brought Hegel in to lecture to them. He had a profound effect — he quieted them. In fact, the entire Prussian court came to hear Hegel's lectures.

His philosophy was conservative precisely for the reasons I have outlined. There is no utopian criticism that is allowable, no grounds for criticizing the practices of a state beyond the level of organic growth that state has achieved at that point. To invoke the rights of man in the face of the situation confronted by the French revolutionaries in 1789 is, he says, an absurdity — an exercise in

taking disembodied reason as an abstract principle, when you must deal with the level of development of spirit at that actual moment. The French Revolution was a mistake. The growth of the national spirit is the highest expression of the world spirit to date, and Hegel's philosophy thus implies and states that the rational is the real, and the real is the rational. Whatever institutions exist really are rational: they exist because they are part of the unfolding of spirit toward its highest expression of freedom. And similarly, if something is rational, it will become real in time — it cannot be forced along in its evolution. Spirit must take its time. History turns out to be a kind of philosophical theodicy, a justification of God's ways to man: if you suffer second-class citizenship, do not protest, do not be angry — that is as far as spirit has gone. Wait your time; when it is time for you to have your equality, you will have it.

Hegel's philosophy is nationalistic because the movement of spirit moves through nations — not through classes, not through genders, not through peoples in general, not through elites, but through nation-states. That serves to valorize the nation above all other subjectivities and all other loyalties: you should think of yourself first as an American rather than as an engineer, a physicist, a cleric, or any other sort of vocational identity.

It is militaristic because the concrete form of the tension between distinct moments of the dialectical development of the world spirit — as the spirit works out the tensions of a dialectic between one national principle and another — has only one instrumentality to resolve it: war. War is good; war moves the world spirit forward. A notable example, for Hegel, would be the struggle between the two opposing interpretations of his thought, left and right, that existed into the 20th century — a struggle that, from a Hegelian point of view, was resolved at Stalingrad.

Finally, it is statist because it considers the state the nexus of human freedom and interaction at its highest and most moral level — and I want you to keep in the background the contrast with the American and British conception of liberty, in which the government that governs least governs best.

The End of History

I want briefly to suggest two final problems with Hegel. First, his philosophy implies the end of history. Precisely because the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the setting of dusk — because we can only understand an epoch when it has come to an end — and yet Hegel claims to understand history, it follows that history must have come to an end. Although he somewhat denies this implication, there is good reason to believe that Hegelianism entailed the view that history ended with the Battle of Jena in 1806, when the national parliamentary state came to predominate, and that the world spirit came to self-consciousness immanently in a single person — that person being Hegel himself, whose lectures are the expression of the world spirit fully arrived at self-knowledge.

Second, and to conclude: history for Hegel is a reproach to Enlightened naturalism. It is the realm of freedom, spirit, and dignity. Science compared to history turns out to be a second-rate kind of knowledge — which is why Hegel has been immensely popular among historians, who love to be told that they are the deepest people in the world. And as we will see, Hegel's idealism leaves a profound legacy: it is the fundamental issue with which all subsequent philosophers of history have had to grapple.

Lecture 6: Marx's Historical Materialism

Karl Marx's historical materialism is one of the philosophical projects of the last two centuries that has irrevocably changed the nature not only of philosophical speculation but obviously of geopolitical realities, of social struggles, and also of historical and sociological analysis. In many ways, Marxism is a very broadly synthetic intellectual project, bringing together elements of aesthetic theory, moral theory, epistemology, and metaphysics, much of which is, to put it plainly, dated. Marx is very much a barometer of intellectual fashion — a Romantic poet in his youth, and a great student of positivist science when positivism was in fashion in the latter half of the century. Nonetheless, there is a certain core of Marx's œuvre, a certain part of his project, which has retained currency even to this day. That, I would urge, is Marx's historical materialism: his interpretation of history and his very rich sociological analysis.

If you were to study any current historiography — American history, European history, world history — I think you would find that it is, even among people who would not consider themselves Marxists, strongly tinctured by Marxian analyses and Marxian posits. So what I am going to try to do here is disentangle one certain thread of the whole project of Marxism — the historical materialism — and offer you a rational reconstruction of it, which I have culled from reading a wide variety of his sources.

Marx's Intellectual Debts

I should begin by noting that Marx was profoundly affected by Hegelian philosophy, Kantian moral theory, French political communism (specifically that of Babeuf), and British political economy — towards the end of his life, the latter becomes increasingly important to him, and he is very much eager to inherit

the mantle of David Ricardo as the great political economist of his generation. Marx attempted to synthesize all of these disparate elements into one overarching philosophy or worldview, much of which has become, as I have suggested, outdated in many ways.

But his historical materialism, which has retained a certain freshness and validity, is specifically an attempt to answer Hegel's idealistic explanation of history. In a way, Hegel was the perfect answer to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment tended to push a mechanistic materialist metaphysic that tried to treat Newtonian science as the bottom-line explanation of the universe. Hegel, of course, came along and refuted it the way you always refute any scientific explanation — with a counterexample. He said, in effect: if all of the world is describable in mathematical laws, give me the mathematical laws of human development. His point was that human history cannot be explained without positing a free consciousness that develops in its process of coming to self-awareness. Therefore, history is the great counterexample to Newtonian physics and Enlightenment science, and historicism very much became the rallying cry of the Romantic generation that fought against what they called the scientism of the Enlightenment.

Now, insofar as he was a historical materialist, Marx — and I will be drawing on Engels' works as well, since there is a fashion nowadays among Marxists to disparage Engels and attribute all the vulgar parts of Marxism to him. Marx himself did not think that. Marx thought Engels was a great companion and scholar, and I would argue that much of the actual historical detail that gave Marxism its accuracy came from Engels, who was in many ways a great scholar. Their joint project of historical materialism was an attempt to answer Hegel and say: you thought you found one great counterexample to science and determinism, didn't you? Well, I am going to take you on your own turf — human history — and show you that it is in fact a

scientific phenomenon that can be described through laws, that it is in fact causally determined, not through freedom, not through rationality, but through what we will see is a technocentric interpretation of the world.

So the basic project, in its roughest form, is the attempt to explain human history on a purely naturalistic or scientific basis.

The Problem of History

In the rational reconstruction I am going to offer you, we will take our point of departure from a comment that Marx rather casually threw out in the *Communist Manifesto*: "Communism is the answer to the riddle of history, and it knows it." It solves the problem of history. It is one of the few places where you get that formulation — the *problem* of history. The question becomes: what is the problem of history, and what is he talking about?

I want to urge that what Marx calls the problem of history is really a problematic — a set of issues or background assumptions. Another way of thinking about it is in terms of history as a narrative: it is the set of three fundamental themes that interact and arise in the unfolding account of human evolution. These themes interact in a dynamic process of evolution in human history, and that evolution is punctuated by very sharp conjunctures.

The Three Issues of the Problematic

The first issue behind this problematic is what I would call philosophical anthropology. The question is, from a naturalistic basis: what distinguishes man from all other species? What is unique about humans that none of the other species seem to share?

The first obvious answer — the Hegelian answer — is consciousness. Humans are conscious. But Marx is extremely concerned with naturalism, is very aware of the Darwinian revolution, is a great admirer of Darwin's, and is sensible enough to realize that

consciousness is probably the last thing humans develop, and that all physical functions we develop undoubtedly serve a naturalistic purpose. To put consciousness forward as the answer is to jump the gun. Why would we develop consciousness in the first place? What function does it serve in our natural evolution? And that is why Marx says there is something more fundamental than consciousness: man the producer. Humans are the only animals that manipulate and change their environment constantly, refashioning it to fit their evolving historical needs and desires. Man — *homo faber* — is the only species that produces with cognitive forethought. And that, for Marx, is the key to cognition and consciousness: consciousness developed instrumentally. We developed consciousness and representations so that we could become more efficient in our productive engagement with nature. That is his first fundamental assumption: man is *homo faber*, the animal that recreates and refashions his environment — that is to say, nature — to correspond to and fulfill his changing historical needs and what Marx calls objectifications: his placing of himself in nature and the mark he leaves there.

The second issue of the problematic is also anthropological, though in a more natural-historical sense. If we think about the problem of production and go out and observe actual producers, we find that even in the most primitive modes of production — specifically hunting-gathering — there is always a division of labor. No single human being is responsible for doing all of the various productive tasks that humans are capable of, even in the simplest modes of production. In hunter-gatherer societies, it is primarily or exclusively men who hunt, and it is exclusively women who gather and tend the young. The first division of labor, therefore, was gender-based, and that has profound implications for the way a society is organized. If the first breakthrough in production is the development of pasturage — who figured out how to tame animals? Obviously the men. We

should then expect to find an extremely patriarchal society with an extremely patriarchal mythology. Contrast that with a society where the first breakthrough is sedentary agriculture. Who figured that out? Certainly not the men — the women figured it out. And in that case — as every anthropologist has suggested, not just Marx — we should expect to find matriarchal and matrilineal lines of descent, and the religious icon will probably be a goddess, the goddess Mother Earth. So the second issue of the problematic is division of labor.

The third issue is scarcity. Again, it is an empirical observation: every hitherto existing human society has been unable to produce more than enough — or even quite enough — of the various goods and luxuries of life for every member of that society. No society in history has been able to fulfill all of the material and cultural wants of all its members. And the result of this, Marx thinks, is absolutely causally determined: one group in society will attempt to enclose a disproportionate share of the material and cultural goods of that community so that they can live a more richly fulfilling life.

To be clear, Marx does not have any moral judgment about this. He does not think it is bad for people to try to exploit other people in order to live a richer life. In fact, this corresponds to what Marx — or rather Kant, since we have all been educated in the subject — would call heteronomy: as long as scarcity exists, each and every one of us will be heteronomously determined to try and get as many of the goods of life as possible. Marx has no value judgment about that at all. It is a completely expectable, predictable, and justifiable sort of activity. And we should expect to find that such an attempt to enclose a disproportionate share of income will probably be based on one's position within the division of labor. You will try to take your position in that division of labor and use it to justify enclosing a

larger share of the goods of life — and that will require gaining power, whether militarily, culturally, or otherwise.

The term for such a group that, on the basis of their position in the division of labor, is able to enclose a larger portion of social income is a class. Do not get too hung up on that word. It corresponds roughly to what Madison and other American Enlightenment figures called interests — it is not all that distinct from the notion of social faction. It is basically the idea that because of our various economic positions we all have disparate interests, and we try to pursue our collective, or class, interests at the expense of competing interests.

So the three background issues are: *homo faber*, division of labor, and scarcity.

The Building Blocks: Persons and Forces of Production

We are now in a position to begin rationally reconstructing Marx's historical materialism. He posits two fundamental entities from which everything else is built. The first is what he calls actual concrete historical persons. Marx had a tendency to pound the desk and insist: I am being concrete — real people, flesh and blood. That is the first posit. The other, far more involved posit is what he calls the forces of production.

Those are the only two entities from which everything is built: actual historical persons and the forces of production. For Marx, especially in his historical materialism, the story of human history is largely the story of the development of the forces of production. The forces of production are, in fact, what will allow us to address the problem of scarcity.

The forces of production are comprised of two elements. The first is known as the means of production, and the second is abstract labor power. What are the means of production? Tools — screwdrivers, stone axes, plows — all things by means of which one can produce.

Similarly, productive facilities and spaces: if one is engaged in agricultural production, a farm is part of the means of production; if one is engaged in industrial production, a factory or specific location — perhaps a water mill or a running brook — is part of the means of production. And finally, raw materials are means of production, not necessarily in a precise chemical sense but in the sense of objects of labor: whatever in any given labor process one begins with, we will call a raw material, noting that it may already have been fashioned by other productive industries.

Abstract labor power is not, as you might first think, simply the mechanical power of the human musculature — though Marx is aware that this in itself is significant and varies dramatically over time (the amount of protein in our diets, for instance, has a profound effect on the muscular power the human frame can deliver). Abstract labor power also encompasses technique and skill as they actually exist at any given moment and develop over time. The most important version of such skill and technique for Marx is what we would call science. Science is the most important element of abstract labor power that moves the forces of production forward, because when science is applied to nature we get applied science — or technology.

I stress this because subsequent Marxists have attempted to ignore it and speak of bourgeois science and bourgeois scientific ideology. To be very clear: Marx did not think science was ideological at all. He thought that historical materialism was a science, that Newtonian physics was a science, that Darwinism was a science, and that they were all absolutely true — or at least as true as things get — and beyond ideological criticism. Marx was not a science-basher. He was very much a child of the Enlightenment, perhaps its last partisan.

Relations of Production, Base, and Superstructure

Persons and the forces of production stand in various sorts of relations that Marx called relations of production. For example: ownership — any individual can own the means of production, such as a farm or tools; mastery in slavery — one can have mastery over abstract labor power in the person of a slave; renting and leasing — one may rent a farm, lease tools, or lease a factory; or, for that matter, in a sense, lease labor power itself — what we would call a wage labor contract. There is a variety of these distinct sorts of productive relations, and they are constantly evolving through history. In fact, one of the things Marx argues we will observe is that in their formal and legal aspect, the relations of production become increasingly humanized with each epoch.

These productive relations, Marx thought, were strongly determined by the stage of historical development of the forces of production. In other words, a primitive technological state conduces toward rather severe forms of labor control, such as slavery: if there are very few labor-saving devices, you try to enclose as much labor as possible and you enslave people. Contrast that with a culture of immense technological sophistication, in which it is no longer profitable to maintain a person year-round — you simply purchase that portion of their labor that you need on a weekly, monthly, or yearly basis and lay them off when it is no longer necessary. The productive relations are thus strongly determined by the stage of development of the productive forces.

The sum total of these productive relations constitutes what Marx calls the economic structure of society. It is worth noting that the structure does not include the entities connected by those relations — in the same way that the structure of a bridge does not include the endpoints; it is that which connects them. This structure Marx calls the base, or basis, of the rest of the social structure. And he called everything built upon it the superstructure, which is thought

to be epiphenomenal to the base — meaning its form is determined by the level of development of the economic base.

What is the superstructure? Law, political institutions, culture, philosophy, painting, music — all forms of culture, aside from science, which was the one domain that was genuinely true and went all the way down. All other forms of culture were superstructural and epiphenomenal to the base. His point is that the various forms of culture we find are determined by the economic structure in such a way that those forms of culture serve to legitimate, regulate, and routinize the existing economic structure.

That is, for many people, a very large and bold claim. And yet, as one thinks about it and tries to step outside one's own historical moment, one can see that there is genuine credence to it. One example I have given to college students concerns athletic activities. The game of lacrosse was originally played by Native Americans, but with one significant difference from the way we play it today: they knew beforehand who was going to win. The point was not for one team to win and the other to lose. It was a game of the living against the dead, and if the dead did not win, they would come back and haunt you for the rest of the year. So the least you could do was once a year dress some men as the dead and let them win. The beauty of the game lay in the élan and skill with which it was acted out. Everyone knew beforehand who was going to win — it was a cosmic drama.

That is counterintuitive to us, because when we play lacrosse, the purpose is to win. Why? Because we are celebrating our economic structure — a structure based on competition. To the person who can play by the rules, score the most points, and make the most profits: that is the winner. And as you watch any aspect of culture, whether poetry (as Marx was specifically concerned with) or the mass culture of sport, you will see that as sporting events evolve they

increasingly come to represent the development of our forces of production and economic structure. Take soccer: there is very little division of labor — everyone runs around and kicks a ball, with one person designated to stop it. Baseball is similar — everyone takes their turn at bat, everyone pitches and fields. Contrast that with a game created after America was industrialized: football. It is very much like a factory. There is a complete division of labor. There are players who play for fifteen years and never touch a football unless they make a mistake. There are others who will never hit anyone for the rest of their career. There is a specialist whose entire job is to kick the ball and who can barely speak English. And atop it all sits the coach on the sideline, wired into headsets, managing the whole operation very much like a factory manager. We are so celebratory of our economic structure that we even know the names of the owners — the capitalists of these industries. Football fans know how profitable the teams are, that winning results in a bottom line.

That is exactly Marx's point: it is not some sort of conspiracy. That is simply what culture does. Through a process of causal determinacy, culture naturally reflects and justifies the economic structure beneath it. We find further examples in medieval aristocratic pastimes: jousting, which is a representation of the warrior's life; hunting; and, rather surprisingly, mathematics competitions. What did monks do for recreation? Debate societies — always reflecting their relationship to the means of production, their labor process, their economic structure.

Modes of Production and the Laws of Historical Development

The various relations of production within a given society correspond to a particular stage of development of the forces of production. Some of these relations constitute an economic structure that Marx referred to as a mode of production. Marx argues that there have been exactly three distinct modes of production in the civilized West.

The first is the slave mode of production of the ancient or classical world. Marx, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Aristotle, was very aware that every single classical Greek author justifies slavery — because slavery is the basis of their society. You find this represented in every philosophical conception throughout the Roman Empire until you reach Augustine, when slavery is coming to an end. The second is the feudal mode of production of the medieval period, associated with natural hierarchies and increasing degrees of freedom as one moves up the social structure — expressed philosophically in Aquinas' great chain of being, as Professor Segru mentioned. There are no slaves, but degrees of freedom still depend on one's place in the economic and political structure, with proximity to the top equated with proximity to God. And finally, the third mode of production is the capitalist mode of production of the modern bourgeois epoch, distinguished above all by the formal legal equality of all persons.

Now, given these elements, Marx offered several laws of development of the modes of production. I would urge that these are scientific laws — that is to say, they are based on historical research and are therefore subject to revision on the basis of new research. One of the mistakes certain Marxist historians make is to treat Marx as a finally complete project. New research — and Marx did not have the greatest research capabilities — might well change the nature of these laws or add new ones. They are open to emendation. Nonetheless, what Marx offers is, on its own terms, fairly impressive.

The first law is that every mode of production persists as long as it is capable of fostering the development of the forces of production. So as long as any given economic structure allows for the further development of the technology of the time, Marx says you can expect those relations of production to persist.

The second law is that when the relations of production serve as a fetter to the development of the forces of production, a period of social transformation ensues in the form of those sharp conjunctures I mentioned earlier — what Marx calls revolutions. The cause of a revolution is reaching a point where the social relations of production are actually inhibiting the growth of technology and applied science. That is when the old mode of production has become outdated.

Marx states this somewhat paradoxically with the expression that history never poses a problem it cannot solve. By the time we have identified a fetter, we can already see the way out. That, of course, raises the third law: every new mode of production gestates, as Marx says, within the womb of the old society, prior to its replacement of that old mode. Feudalism, he argues, actually gestated in the womb of the Roman Empire — in the March Lands of Northwestern and Northeastern Europe, where slavery was not persisting quite as strongly and where Germanic warrior structures had mingled to create an entering wedge of the feudal arrangement. When the Roman Empire fell, the new mode of production was already in place. Similarly, within feudal society there were enclaves of the bourgeoisie — *bourgeois* from *burghers*, the city-dwellers — particularly in the cities of the Hanseatic League, which had engaged in extensive trade long before the demise of the medieval epoch, and which were in fact the first proto-capitalist societies based on contract rather than hierarchy. This is reflected in the famous medieval German expression *Stadtluft macht frei* — city air makes free. For hundreds of years you could see the gestation of the new capitalist society in the womb of the old feudal order, had you only visited the cities of the Hanseatic League or the famous Fugger family with its immense mining industries.

To jump ahead briefly: if there is a communist mode of production ahead of us, where do we find it gestating within the old one? This seems paradoxical, but not for Marx. He says you find it in trade unions. Whenever you see a trade union, you see workers interacting on the basis of communality, of mutual risk and benefit — and that, he argues, is the first form of the next mode of production already emerging within the present one.

Capitalism and the Problem of Scarcity

Let me now return to capitalism. Marx argues that the capitalist mode of production is the first truly dynamic economic structure in history. There is a myth that Marx hated the bourgeoisie and thought them morally contemptible. That is incredibly wrong. Marx had profound respect for the bourgeoisie and was aware that the bourgeois epoch was the greatest epoch in human history to date — the most progressive by far. Part of what makes it so is that it is a genuinely dynamic economic structure: the exigencies of competition, not the moral worth of the bourgeoisie, but the very fact of competition forces the bourgeoisie to constantly revolutionize the means of production. Just to keep ahead of the competition you are forced to invest in research and development, to create new labor-saving devices, to fund scientific research — you have no choice, it is the only way to retain the competitive edge. For the very first time in human history, the economy does not simply expand on the basis of area — more and more arable land — but begins to expand exponentially. You begin to use the same small number of resources and produce a vastly greater amount from them. Each unit of labor power produces far more use and exchange value than had ever been achieved before. And Marx says that with capitalism, the spiral of the growth of production just gets faster and faster. Within two hundred years you go from the cart and buggy to the space

shuttle. You go from the age of steam to the age of fossil fuels to the age of nuclear power. Just incredible.

And then the crucial point: the bourgeois mode of production expands the forces of production so dramatically that you actually reach the point where it is possible to solve the problem of scarcity. That is the great contribution of the bourgeoisie to world history: they make it possible for the first time to develop the technical means to actually produce more than enough goods — cultural, material, spiritual — for every single person in our societies.

Unfortunately, there is one drawback. Given the disproportionate distribution of incomes under capitalism, the bulk of the population lacks the material resources to consume the plenitude of commodities that industrial capitalism can produce. And Marx says this happens periodically, and the result is what he calls recessions and depressions. Think about what the business cycle really is, what a recession or depression really represents. Factories are producing just as efficiently as they were before, but people do not have enough money to buy the goods. It is a crisis not of overproduction but of underconsumption: the relations of production and distribution of incomes are causing factories to close down because there are no buyers. And when we return to our laws of history, what do we find? We reach the point where the relations of production serve as a fetter on the development of the productive forces. What stops us from producing more and more and developing more and more labor-saving devices is that we cannot find anyone to sell them to. And Marx says: whenever you know that that is going to happen, what follows? As soon as it becomes a complete and utter fetter, we can expect a period of social transformation — a revolution. Hence not his hope that communism would occur, not even merely his prediction, but his absolute certainty. As he saw it, each time the business cycle occurs, it gets deeper. Fewer and fewer companies

escape the slump or depression. There is increasing oligopoly. Eventually you get down to roughly nine or ten multinational corporations running everything. Then you enter a deep depression. And then it will be quite simple: you nationalize them.

Communism as the Solution to the Problem of History

What we have, then, is communism representing the solution to the problem of history. Capitalism has offered us the technical means to solve the problem of scarcity, but cannot do so because of its relations of production. We simply do away with those relations of production. In redressing the problem of disparate incomes, the last fetter on the development of the productive forces is removed, and the problem of scarcity is solved on a global basis.

This represents the end of what Kant called heteronomy. As long as there is scarcity, you will always be determined to act by the desire to get more and more of the goods of life. But when there is more than enough for everyone, you will no longer be so determined. And then we will enter what Marx sees as the Kantian epoch of autonomy. This is where his great synthesis lies: at that moment, history will no longer be about solving the problem of scarcity, because it will be solved. Everything before communism can, in fact, be called prehistory — because during that entire span humans are acting like animals, as stimulus-and-response machines responding to the problem of scarcity and division of labor. After that comes history proper, when human development is nothing more than the unfolding of pure human free consciousness in its various projects.

Communism will, of course, be preceded by a transitional phase called socialism, in which the means of production are nationalized by the government. But ultimately, under communism, the state withers away, because the state is nothing other than a means of repression to support an economic structure, and when there are no

classes, there is no need for it. The result is a form of perfectly free anarchy.

Strengths and Problems

So much for Marxist historical materialism. I want to suggest what I find powerful about it and, secondly, what I personally find problematic.

I find powerful its conceptualization of past epochs and its attempt to create law-like regularities in history. I am not convinced that all of those regularities are entirely adequate, but there is plenty of room for subsequent research and reformulation. I am also impressed by its ability to unify large chunks of world history under a coherent framework.

There is, however, something strange in Marx's historical materialism — not so much in the analysis of the past as in the discussion of communism. You will recall that Professor Segru mentioned the Hegelian dictum that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the setting of dusk — meaning that you can only understand an epoch when it has ended. Subsequent analytic philosophers of history have shown that this is in fact the logic of what they call narrative sentences. If someone were to step into Mrs. Newton's house on the night Isaac was born and say, "Lo, unto you is born the greatest physicist of your age," undoubtedly Mrs. Newton would have suggested they take a powder. But if you stopped at Mrs. Newton's house forty or fifty or sixty years later and said, "Forty or fifty or sixty years ago, the greatest physicist of your time was born here," that would have been true. The meaning of the event is only clear to us afterwards. Hegel made this point about Greek philosophy: when do we get the great flowering of Greek philosophical understanding? When the Greek city-state is dead. When it is all over, that is when Plato and Aristotle can understand it.

The deep point is that we judge past events on the basis of their subsequent outcomes. In 1820 someone might have spoken of the signing of the Constitution as the birth of a great nation; in 1865 someone would have looked at it and called it the first step toward the Civil War — a re-evaluation. Well, Marx is doing something curious. He has all of these wonderful things to say about capitalism with one exception: the only reason it falls short is that it is not as good as communism. He is judging capitalism deficient — despite being better than every preceding epoch — by comparison with an epoch yet to come. He is speaking of a future event as if it were a present one. There is a technical word for that: prophecy. Unless you have actually experienced communism, on what basis do you critique capitalism? And to speak of communism as an inevitable outcome is to speak of future events as if they were present ones — exactly as Moses does, or as Jesus does when he prophesies the end of the world.

I would urge, however, that this is not a fatal problem for Marxist historical materialism as such. It is a problem for Marxism as a political project, which clearly takes on the character of a prophecy. Incidentally, many Christian thinkers have argued this: the British Cardinal Newman once said that Marxism is the last Christian heresy — the last time anyone would construct an eschatology in which the poor would take over. After Marx, no one would quite believe that again.

But I would urge that you can separate the communist political project from the mode of analysis of the past. What you are left with is something close to the first creation of social science. It is a particularly compelling way of thinking about past thinkers. Rather than simply trying to get inside texts as such, you might ruminate over these texts and ask yourself: how might the economic structure of the time have determined this particular formulation in Aristotle,

or that particular notion in Descartes? Or perhaps the bourgeois glorification of self-interest had something to do with the development of consequentialism in English-speaking philosophy — and it should not surprise us that the English-speaking world was the first to have capitalism, while Germany, which was relatively economically underdeveloped and largely peasant at the time, does not understand consequentialism and finds it bizarre. That mode of production simply does not exist there yet.

In sum, Marxism is such a broad project that it is best used as a series of resources from which we can eclectically draw, leaving behind what we do not find useful. And I cannot help feeling that Marxist historical materialism may be the most useful part of Marxism for analysts today, and hopefully in the future as well. Thank you very much.

Lecture 7: Nietzsche's Critique of Historical Consciousness — *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*

In this lecture, we are going to engage with Friedrich Nietzsche's early essay on history, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. It is a very brief text, but rather difficult in its own way. In it, Nietzsche focuses on an all-too-often ignored yet critical question — namely the obvious, intuitive one: why should we think about history? Why should we care about history? Why are we so obsessed with the past? What do we hope to learn from history? What is its value? Why all this talk of history?

Given Nietzsche's biological and somewhat naturalistic orientation, this question demands an analysis of the value of historical thought and knowledge for human life and human needs — and most especially for what he would consider the life instinct, the vital élan that leads to creativity and to the growth of the human spirit. The question is therefore: to what extent does history contribute to this, and to what extent might it actually hinder such instincts and drives? It raises the fundamental possibility of a conflict between, on the one hand, our knowledge of the past and its meaning, and on the other, our human life needs, our drives, our instincts, and our will. Nietzsche has no question as to where his loyalties reside. At the very opening of the text, he states: only so far as history serves life will we serve it. That is to say, from a rational and humane perspective, one cannot serve history to the point where it begins to consume life itself.

The Unhistorical and the Burden of Memory

Nietzsche begins his analysis by contrasting the human condition — filled as he thinks it is with memory and historical existence — with what he calls the eternal present of other herd mammals. This may seem a trivial contrast, but Nietzsche is being biologically precise. We are, after all, herd mammals: featherless bipeds that live in packs, hunt in packs, and eat in packs. If that is the case, then it is a fair contrast to set us alongside other herd animals. The difference is that we have a memory of our past and an awareness of our historical legacies, and they do not.

Such animals — and he takes the example of the cow, which he uses quite often, since cows are ruminants, those apparently thoughtful animals — always lack an awareness of their past or future and live in an eternal present without cares. There is a certain blissful quality one can observe in a cow grazing in a pasture. It is not concerned about where it came from. It is not concerned that it is going to wind up as a steak. And, to quote Nietzsche, such animals are "only briefly concerned with their pleasure or displeasure, enthralled by the moment, and for that reason neither melancholy nor bored." That is the great virtue, the happiness of the herd beast: it lives in the present, unconcerned about its future and unburdened by its legacies. And for that reason, man envies the beast. We envy its happiness and yearn to be free from our past. But, as Nietzsche writes, "however far and fast he runs, the chain runs with him." We cannot escape our memory, and it is a burden we carry.

Is this not, in fact, what we envy in childhood? When we speak of the innocence of children, what do we refer to except the fact that children have not yet developed historical consciousness? They do not yet carry a legacy of the past like a ball and chain. That is the innocence we nostalgically admire, and it serves as Nietzsche's initial point of contrast: the distinction between an unhistorical existence, such as that of the other herd mammals, and our own.

The Horizon and the Surfeit of History

Nietzsche notes that all life requires what he calls a horizon — a limited field of action. If you were going to study nature as a physicist, it would be absurd to begin by asking: let me understand nature as a whole; what is the nature of the universe? That question will lead you to run in circles forever. You have to limit your horizon and say, for instance: I am interested in a particular problem — say, the rectilinear propagation of light and the fact that light is refracted differently through different media. I want to determine the values that go into Snell's Law, the law that governs how light is refracted. That is an example of limiting your horizon so that you can work creatively and fruitfully within it. Similarly, as a historian, to speak of the nature of all of history — everything that has ever happened — is a project from which, if anyone gets through the first chapter, it will be remarkable. You have to limit yourself: perhaps to a study of the Renaissance, or a history of painting, or a history of the Roman Empire. Those are limited fields of action, problems with a horizon.

Well, the same is true of life. Our lives must have horizons. Consider someone who is part of a community and wishes to improve it in some way. How paralyzed would that person be if they felt they had to resolve every problem in the world — every disease, every famine, every structural injustice, every unfairness? Without a horizon, the will, the desire, and the ability to act become seized by self-doubt, insecurity, and an uncertainty of where to begin. It is Nietzsche's contention that too much history — too large a dose of awareness of the human past — dissolves that horizon and leads to an inability to mark off a limited field of action.

As a creative being, man needs some history. There is no question of that. He needs some memory in order to fashion and refashion himself as man, as distinct from other herd mammals. But too much history — a surfeit of history — produces the German *Weltschmerz*, a

world-weariness, a burden-feeling for all of historical existence. It leads to a nausea (in the Sartrean sense of discontent with the human condition) and to ennui — a decadent lack of will, appetite, and desire. We should never see history as an end in itself, according to Nietzsche, but as a means to something else: to life. That is the altar upon which all things must be sacrificed. History, as he puts it, "so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power." It does not serve the past or the future; it serves creativity, it serves will. When history works for us, it emboldens us to do great things. It serves as an inspiration to creativity, growth, and development. History should never be pursued merely for the sake of collecting more knowledge about the past. In accord with his biological thinking, Nietzsche believes that all historical understanding emerges from human needs.

The Three Forms of History

Nietzsche identifies three distinct forms of historical interpretation — three different types of historical account. These are the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. Each of these forms emerges from and is derived from different human needs, and each fulfills different functions. Nietzsche regards each of them as valuable and to be cherished. But when any one of them dominates at the expense of the others, the result is detrimental to life and becomes a source of danger.

Monumental history serves the need of active and powerful individuals. It is the history of monumental events and monumental beings — great, inspiring figures and episodes. Most military histories of the Civil War, for example, are monumental histories: the tremendous integrity of Robert E. Lee, the fierce competitiveness of Stonewall Jackson, the brutal clarity of mind of Ulysses S. Grant, the utter ruthlessness and daring of William Tecumseh Sherman.

Similarly, many great art histories are monumental: the universal genius of Leonardo da Vinci, the daring exploits of Michelangelo.

What monumental history serves, then, is the human need to find models — teachers — for people who aspire to greatness and creativity, to producing monumental things themselves. Such people cannot always find their teachers in the present, since the number of monumental figures in all of history is fairly small. They need role models, they need sources of inspiration, and they look to the past to find them. The demand for monumental history expresses something very positive: a faith in humanity, such that — to quote Nietzsche — "the great moments in the struggle of individuals form a chain, in them the high points of humanity are linked throughout millennia, that what is highest in such a moment of the distant past be for me still alive, right, and great." A philosopher, for instance, may look back to Socrates or to Heraclitus, not as relics to be understood purely within their own contexts and times, but as symbols of greatness and achievement and as inspirations — thinking of himself as in some sense their contemporary, their inheritor. The obvious benefit of such monumental history is that it produces courage: the belief that such greatness is indeed achievable because it has been achieved before. We need not limit ourselves to conventional styles in painting; we have seen revolutionary painters — Raphael, Rembrandt, Picasso — and therefore we can feel the courage to experiment, to try new and vast things. As Nietzsche writes: "the knowledge that the great which once existed was at least possible once and may well again be possible sometimes."

We can think of clear examples. Petrarch and the early figures of the Renaissance produced just such monumental histories of the classical Greeks and of the great philosophers and poets precisely in order to inspire themselves to achieve such greatness again in a context they

considered dominated by the mediocrity of Scholasticism. Similarly, the early scientists of the Renaissance studied the pre-Socratic physicists as a monumental inspiration about the possibility of speculating about nature without recourse to supernatural means or religion.

However, as with every mode of history, monumental history has its disadvantages. First, the comparisons between past and present that one finds in it are always imprecise and generally ahistorical. They never take into account the reality of the context that produced a particular moment or a particular monumental figure. Monumental history is incapable of accounting for the causes of events, particularly when such causes are ignoble or mundane. How can a monumental history account for the great steadfastness of Ulysses S. Grant when part of that story includes his rather troubled early life — a man who was a perennial failure at everything he tried before the war, and who, when the bloodshed became most serious, crawled inside a bottle for a few days? Those sorts of realities tend to deflate the monumental, and it is precisely such details that become obscured when we understand the past in purely monumental terms.

National and religious celebrations are all monumental histories, and they always ignore the causes of the events they celebrate. We celebrate the Fourth of July as a great moment of independence — but do we mention that one of the primary reasons the event occurred was that the colonists were unwilling to pay any taxes, despite being taxed far less than virtually any other subjects in the British Empire, and yet refused to pay for their own protection and defense? Similarly, when we celebrate Easter and the Passion of Christ, do we note that the reason it happened was in part because a follower sold Jesus for money, and that Jesus had not succeeded in organizing sufficient political support within the Jewish community to protect himself from crucifixion? Monumental history tends, as

well, to ignore vast portions of the past — those portions that are uninspiring or non-monumental. An excellent example is Hegel's philosophy of history, which in many ways exemplifies monumental history at the philosophical level: after China has produced its great contribution of showing that the one is free, it drops out of history. Apparently nothing happened in China after the Shang Dynasty. That sort of violence to historical knowledge is one of the main drawbacks of the monumental mode.

Antiquarian history serves the need to preserve and admire — what Nietzsche calls the revering soul. Antiquarian history is the study and collection of antiquities, of old things, of those things which somehow mark our origins and which we cherish as treasures. The antiquarian historian preserves what has allowed for the growth of himself, his nation, his culture, his city — and this serves life. Just as monumental history serves life by providing models, antiquarian history serves life by transmitting the traditions and institutions that have sustained us and teaching us to treasure and revere them.

On the positive side, antiquarian history serves to create a we among the inheritors of certain institutions and traditions. An antiquarian awareness of the Constitutional Convention, for example, serves to create a national identity even for peoples whose ancestors may not have been in this country at the time, or who may have been enslaved, or who may not have been part of the civic community at all. Nonetheless, an awareness of those traditions — engaging in Fourth of July celebrations, preserving the genealogies of the founders — gives people a sense of collective identity, a strong sense of community, because these become shared inheritances. As Nietzsche writes, such reverence is especially valuable "where it imbues modest, coarse, even wretched conditions in which a man or people live with a simple touching feeling of pleasure and contentment." Think of what happens to a nation undergoing famine

and hardship. The people will be sorely tempted to emigrate en masse. What keeps them at home is that antiquarian connection with their past — that sense that the old country holds something sacred, something valuable. And this serves life. It serves the life of the nation and may serve the life of the people. Even where emigration is not possible, antiquarian connection with the past gives some consolation, some hope, some belief that their condition is not as desperate as objective conditions might suggest. Nietzsche compares this to "the contentment of a tree with its roots, the happiness of knowing oneself not to be wholly arbitrary and accidental, but rather as growing out of a past as its heir, flower, and fruit." This is no small source of psychological sustenance.

However, antiquarian history has its downsides as well. While it may serve life, it certainly does not serve historical truth or pure knowledge. Such antiquarian history tends to tear its antiquities out of their context. The wonderful founding fathers and their deliberations are typically stripped of context — for instance, the fact that a previous constitutional arrangement had failed abysmally, or that many of these men held U.S. government bonds that were not going to be paid off under the old Articles of Confederation, and so created a new constitution under which those bonds would be redeemed at highly profitable rates. Antiquarian history also hinders judgment, because it teaches us that whatever is old is to be venerated, that whatever has endured is valuable — and thus the useful and the outdated are not distinguished from one another. Nietzsche says that one may then witness "the repugnant spectacle of a blind lust for collecting, of a restless raking together of all that has once been." Consider the continued fascination with the Stars and Bars in the American South — the holding onto that relic. That is a past which is venerated simply because it is old, without any consideration of whether it is good or bad or serves any current purpose. Similarly, think of institutions like Jim Crow, or caste

structures in other countries. These are all relics of a past that persist only because of this antiquarian mode of history. It venerates everything old and fails to distinguish between that which is useful and serves life and humanity, and that which stands in the way. And this raises a third critical point: antiquarian history only understands how to preserve life, how to keep alive the things that have helped, but it does not know how to generate life. It teaches us only how to conserve what has been; it never gives us any clue as to how to create what we need, how to build something new. Only the monumental can offer that — through models and inspiration. Thus, as Nietzsche writes, antiquarian history "hinders the powerful resolve for new life," stops human creativity, and leaves it "shackled to the dead hand of the past."

Critical history is the third form, by which Nietzsche means the developed scientific historiography of the nineteenth century — a fully self-conscious, historicist awareness of the distinction between past and present. It serves the human need for liberation from the shackles of, for example, a conservatism born of mindless antiquarianism. Critical history teaches us how to criticize our past, how to identify the elements of our society that are simply relics of an outdated epoch. The strategy of critical history generally is to drag something old and tired before the bar of judgment, where it is interrogated and condemned in the interests of life and growth.

One thinks of C. Vann Woodward's brilliant work *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, written during the height of segregation, which analyzed in a historically critical way how the institution of segregation in the South had emerged, revealed its flawed origins, criticized and judged it deficient, and condemned it — and which had a profound impact in policy circles. We can think of similar examples from the subcontinent of Asia, where histories of caste have served to undermine belief in the caste system — time-worn traditions dating

back well before the time of Christ and revered as part of a religious legacy, finally exposed for what they are: the result of the conquest of a native Dravidian population by Indo-Aryan invaders, who then subjugated and separated the conquered peoples on the basis of exploitation and perhaps disease-based separation. Since those conditions have long since been transcended, there is no longer any need for such structures.

What judges in critical history, however, is not justice in the abstract. What judges is life — the need to move on, the need to grow and develop. Critical history is a tough sort of history that requires the strength to hold even time-worn pieties up to the knife. The most famous early example is probably the Higher Criticism of the Bible — the critical-historical scholarship of the late eighteenth century — which required a very tough spirit because it showed for the first time that this text, revered as the foundation of the most cherished religion, is in fact a compilation that can be dated to specific moments, comprised of a variety of different texts, edited by priestly scribes, with some texts left out, some put in, some rewritten, some altered, and with the language varying depending on where in Israel the individual texts were written. Similarly, the Higher Criticism of the New Testament showed that hundreds of gospels were in circulation in early Christianity; the bishops decided which were orthodox and included them in the canon, while those that were deemed heterodox were burned.

It is also a dangerous practice, because everything can be subjected to criticism, and everything that has a history has its share of injustice — and therefore everything might rightfully be condemned, including ourselves. A critical history of the emergence of the United States, as attempted by the great colonial historian Edmund S. Morgan, argues that the expansion of democratic rights for white Americans was made possible directly by slavery: once the working

class was exclusively enslaved and politically disenfranchised, it posed no threat of class conflict, and voting rights could therefore safely be extended to a broader population of free men. Critical history thus places both the monumental and the antiquarian in their historical contexts, giving us a genuinely scientific understanding of what made them possible. But this can be extremely deflationary. Hegel once remarked that the great man must be viewed from a distance — that no man is a hero to his valet. Once you get too close to a great man and realize his bizarre habits or personal failings, the luster fades. So it is with all monumental events: they all have their embarrassing undersides, and the critical historian is always bringing these things to light.

Five Evils of Excessive Historical Consciousness

Modern man, according to Nietzsche, has gone so far as to demand that history be a science, placing no limits on it as it relates to life. We are willing to sacrifice life itself in favor of a scientific understanding of the human past. The result, as Nietzsche writes, is that "historical knowledge floods in ever anew from inexhaustible springs, the alien and the disconnected throng about, memory opens all its gates and is still not opened wide enough." An awareness of the contingency of historical events and the wide variety of phenomena that make up the world's historical process leads to nothing so much as confusion. There is too much to assimilate. Everything is seen in both its positive and negative features, placed in its context. And his point is that historical consciousness eventually leads us not merely into confusion but into accepting that confusion as our regular state — where people are no longer certain of their opinions, no longer certain of what is right and wrong, of what they want to do in life. There are too many possibilities, too many options, too many sides to every issue. The human nature that evolves from this condition of uncertainty is, he finds, relatively weak and passive.

It lacks the strong life instinct that a much more limited horizon would produce. It lacks confidence.

Nietzsche thinks that this surfeit of historical consciousness in the modern age results in five particular evils.

The first is what he calls an excessive contrast between inside and outside, which weakens the personality. Modern man separates his internal sense of self from his external world. The external world is too complicated and confusing, so he retreats into an internal focus, trying to understand his own unique nature. This means that the world around him becomes a mere spectacle — something in which he is not a natural participant and in which he is not at ease. He becomes, as Nietzsche writes, "a spectator, merely enjoying himself and strolling around and brought to a condition which can hardly be altered for a moment, even by great wars and great revolutions." News of tragedies and atrocities abroad elicits from us a sympathetic shake of the head — "isn't that unfortunate?" — and nothing more. Our souls are no longer deeply moved. We are no longer profoundly affected by historical events because we are overwhelmed by them. We have learned to separate our internal states from the world around us, to place a barrier of distance between ourselves and reality.

The second problem is that too much historical awareness leads an age to think of itself as the most just. As we come to understand more and more about history, we come to believe that we are the most fair-minded, the most reasonable, the most just. We think our historical objectivity reflects a heightened desire for justice. But justice is a hard virtue and requires a strong and even fanatical hand. A modern person can recapitulate the themes of the historical past, but never with the original strength or élan of those who lived through them. As Nietzsche writes, "the original note usually awoke great deeds, needs, terror; this one, the historical, lulls us to sleep

and turns us into soft men of pleasure. It is as though the Heroic Symphony by Beethoven had been arranged for two flutes and reserved for the use of dreamy opium smokers." The actual motives of our historical objectivity are not a ruthless desire for scientific truth, but simply curiosity, boredom, and a need to gossip. Most historical judgments are based on the naive belief that our own age is right in all its popular opinions, and that to write in accordance with the times is the same as being just. We write about progress from absolute monarchy to human freedom and equality as though that progress is obviously good — because we believe in human freedom and equality. But Nietzsche does not believe we are equal; he thinks democracy is a mediocre form of government that produces mediocre people and a mediocre culture. What we call justice is simply the affirmation of the virtues we already live by, and that is itself a result of our excess of historical consciousness.

The third problem is that critical history destroys myths and illusions. As Nietzsche writes, "the instincts of a people are impaired, and the maturing of the individual, no less than that of the whole, is prevented." Critical history teaches us that George Washington was not the great austere figure who refused to chop down a cherry tree and refused to lie about it afterwards — but rather an ambitious middling planter who married a much older and wealthier woman for her property, and who was perhaps stiff and rigid because his wooden teeth were extremely painful. That John Adams was not inspired by the noblest of principles but was a rather pompous and vain man full of ambition. That Thomas Jefferson was not a great egalitarian champion of freedom — yes, he wrote interesting documents, but he also held slaves, and could not understand why they were not working hard enough to help him pay off his various debts. There is truth in all of these statements, but they destroy the myths, the illusions, the inspirations that foster creativity. It is like telling a child that there is no Santa Claus before the child is ready.

There is a point at which children need to believe in Santa Claus, in the tooth fairy, in the notion that good people are rewarded and bad people suffer. Certain creative and life-inspiring institutions and practices require an atmosphere of illusion around them. Telling an artist that he is merely working within the formal possibilities developed over the last twenty years, and that the whole enterprise is somewhat beside the point since the development of photography — or, worse, that all his painting merely expresses childhood traumas and infantile wish-fulfillment — may be true, or may not be, but in any case it destroys the atmosphere of awe and reverence within which the artist works and which inspires him to think he is creating something absolute and significant. Similarly, any thorough critical history of Christianity proves the undoing of Christianity by dispelling the atmosphere of piety and mystery that surrounds it. Tracing the figure of Satan back to Zoroastrian Angra Mainyu, noting that the halo of the saints derives from Mazdaean iconography, pointing out that miracle-working messianic figures were not uncommon in the first-century Near East, analyzing Paul as a pragmatic entrepreneur who avoided sea travel out of fear — once you provide all these details, you dissolve the atmosphere of reverence that sustained belief. Monumental achievements and great men are cut down to size. Theodore Roosevelt, one of the great energetic presidents of the twentieth century, turns out to have been very probably overcompensating for a small and weak childhood during which he was constantly bullied — a textbook case of Adlerian overcompensation. For an institution or a person to grow, it needs this mystical atmosphere of self-confidence, this life-creating illusion. When you point out all of the strange contingencies that had to align for some creative individual to achieve success, you are more likely to produce accountants than painters. The creative spirit requires the mythic atmosphere in which Rembrandt is, in some sense, alive in the mind of Picasso, and Raphael in the mind of Rembrandt. It is

precisely this that historical consciousness destroys in favor of a knowledge that is sterile.

The fourth problem is that as we come to understand more and more of the past, we come to see ourselves as latecomers — as *epigones*, the last men at the end of history. We are the result of a vast sweep of history in which all the great things have already occurred. We stand back and reflect on what has been done. The wisdom of historical awareness means we are, in a sense, already old men. The youth and creativity of our species lie behind us. There are no great new projects ahead of us. All that is left is to understand what we have done. As Nietzsche writes, historical education "really is a kind of inborn gray-headedness, and those who bear its mark from childhood on surely must attain the instinctive belief in the old age of mankind." Historical awareness tends to make us believe that we have gone about as far as we can go, that there is nothing new under the sun.

The fifth problem is that this leads us to become ironic and even cynical about ourselves. Our scientific history teaches us that previous creative periods were not burdened by our historicist self-awareness as these last men, as those who have worn out their spirit and have nothing left but reflection on the past. And the historian himself must be aware that the reason other peoples were creative was precisely because they did not carry that burden, did not have that awareness. We come to be ironic even about our own historical understanding, recognizing its absence in all truly creative epochs. This becomes fully cynical with Hegelianism, which Nietzsche detested: in Hegel, whatever has won in the process of history is proclaimed necessary and ordained by the World Spirit. Whatever came out on top was right, because "the rational is the real and the real is the rational." This is fawning upon the victors. It means we bow before every authority simply because it has succeeded in

becoming an authority. We prostrate ourselves before power and call it reason.

The Antidotes: The Unhistorical and the Superhistorical

What we find with Nietzsche, then, is that our surfeit of historical consciousness has destroyed our plastic ability to grow and change. The antidotes he proposes are what he calls the unhistorical and the superhistorical. The unhistorical is simply the ability to forget — to leave the past to itself and charge into the future with a naïve belief and confidence in possibilities. The enemy of this forgetting is science, which is always a horizon-dissolving phenomenon, throwing man into an endless, unlimited sea of known becoming. Forgetting, by contrast, is the horizon-creating phenomenon.

The superhistorical is the realm of the stable and the eternal — the positing of great ideals and eternal verities. It is stable being without becoming. It is the realm of art and religion, of timeless essence and the universal, and it is the enemy of science. A history that served life would fuse the unhistorical and the superhistorical. Unlike science, it would not claim objectivity in the sense of a single univocal interpretation or the induction of general laws. General laws of history, Nietzsche remarks, would be incredibly dull and trivial if we could discover them, and would probably have to do with diet. Nietzsche thinks that history is always perspectival — always a question of one's interests, the perspective one brings, and one's goals. Rather, a history that served life would be like art, creating a unity and thematic coherence that exemplifies the general in the particular and the profound in the simple. It would allow us to forget what needs to be forgotten — the suffering and injustices of little men, of average people — and to focus on the great human beings of the past as an inspiration for the production of greatness ourselves, so that we shall not be merely pygmies and last men.

Such a history might be self-consciously mythopoetic, or it might be critical, but always with an eye toward the practical goal of life and health. Examples of the former, mythopoetic history, would be Nietzsche's own *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* or *Ecce Homo*, his mythopoetic autobiography. An example of the latter, critical history, would be *The Genealogy of Morals* — a scientific analysis of the origins of our moral concepts of good and evil, good and bad — or *The Birth of Tragedy*, his philological research into the fusion of the Dionysian and Apollonian modes in Attic tragedy. All four of these works are at once critical, antiquarian, and monumental. Thus Nietzsche himself, as a historian — and most of his works do in fact take the form of history — never practices one mode at the expense of the others, but always in the service of life.

Lecture 8: Weber's Historical Sociology

Max Weber's historical sociology is in many ways still today the principal source of sociological insight, speculation, and research. Very much one of the fathers of modern sociology, he drew on a tradition which had been sketched very roughly by figures like Auguste Comte, Marx and Engels, and Durkheim, and brought them together in an extremely rich and compelling, historically precise reading of various sociological problems and categories. Today we are going to look at one specific centerpiece of his most important work, a two-volume text called *Economy and Society*. The centerpiece of that text is the concept of legitimate domination. In particular, Weber argued that there were three pure forms of legitimate domination.

Before we do that, however, I want to stress the ways in which Weber is different from the sociologists who preceded him, and insofar as he is different, the ways in which he sets a new agenda for sociology.

Weber's Departures from His Predecessors

In many ways Weber is a historical materialist, like Marx and Engels were, but only in a very broad sense. Marx and Engels, you will recall, were very much obsessed with the economy — they thought the economy was the basis of society. Weber took, I would argue, a much broader view of historical materialism. He said the economy and economic action is only one species, one particular form, of a larger phenomenon, which is the basic medium of all human interaction and exchange — and that medium, of course, is power. It is power in general that Weber is concerned with, in all of its manifestations: not simply economic, but social, patriarchal — that is to say, gender power — familial, and the most influential subspecies of that, which is of course the legitimate forms of domination.

Another distinction between Weber and his predecessors as historical materialists was the form of his theory. Marx and Engels were very much affected by Newtonian science — that was their model for social science — and so what they tried to offer were laws of development. Weber is far more influenced by the Darwinian revolution, and what he offers, as opposed to the deductive laws one would expect from physics, are rather taxonomic schemes, schemes of categorization that one finds in biology. These taxonomic schemes allowed Weber to conduct what we would call cross-historical analysis: finding a particular scheme and then examining how that scheme worked out in different historical epochs within a single culture and then in different geographic areas — how, for instance, one form of authority that was essentially the same in China and India in a certain period took on distinct forms because of geographic or economic factors particular to those societies.

Weber also sought, far more so than any other sociologist before or since, a value-neutral analysis of sociology. He was passionately committed to the doctrine that there should be no passion in sociology. He took as a political credo the view that one ought not have a political credo if one is a sociologist, particularly in one's work. This fact-value distinction has been philosophically challenged — and I think rightly so — and it has also been challenged as a general pedagogical strategy. But I think we very often take Weber out of his context. What disturbed Weber was the situation in his own context, which is to say German academia around the turn of the century. He feared that all too many sociologists and professors in general were using their lectures to preach a particular political ideology to their students, and he was very much afraid that this was the harbinger of a new sort of brainwashing. He very much wanted to be clear that any sociological theory should not be designed and expressed so that it can serve as the handmaiden of a particular political party or particular political worldview.

Not that Weber did not have his own political opinions — he did, and they were very profound and pronounced, and he had no reluctance to express them. But he always expressed them distinctly from his sociological discussions. They were two different things, and they could well be related; but if one wanted to make political inferences from one's sociology, it was best to do so in a political context and not in an academic context.

The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Domination

Let us now return to that centerpiece of *Economy and Society*: the formulation of the three pure types of legitimate domination, or authority — the word in German being *Herrschaft*, which will become very important in the next lecture.

Weber defines domination as "the probability that certain specific commands, possibly all commands, will be obeyed by a given group of persons." This is a purely behavioral, purely observable criterion. Domination is therefore only one particular species of power. While it might be partially supported by custom — it is customary, for example, to follow orders and to do what authorities say — it might also be supported by personal material interests (if one works for an authority, one has an interest in supporting that authority), or even by an ideal goal of solidarity, since to follow authority is, in some fundamental sense, to bring society together, to become one with one's community. All of these things do in fact support authority, but none of them is sufficient to fully support and enable legitimate domination. Only the belief in the legitimacy of the given form of domination is sufficient for that purpose.

Domination, or the rule over a considerable number of persons, requires what Weber called a staff — a group of persons who are the agents of the ruler. Domination is thus fundamentally a three-place relation between a ruler, a staff, and subjects. The point is that as the

type of legitimate domination varies, so too varies the kind of administrative staff one can expect to find, the type of obedience one can expect from the subjects and the staff, and the very mode of exercising such authority.

Types of domination for Weber are therefore classified according to their claim to legitimacy — according to what grounds a particular authority is legitimated on. He identifies three such grounds, three ways of legitimating any particular authority.

The first is **rational grounds**, which rest on the belief that enacted rules are legal and that those elevated to authority have a right to that elevation under the relevant legal stipulations and the legal right to issue commands. Weber calls this form of domination **legal authority**.

The second ground is what he calls **traditional grounds**, which rest on the belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions — what we might call the good old ways — and in the legitimacy of those who exercise authority in accordance with them. Weber calls this **traditional authority**.

The third ground is what he calls **charismatic grounds**. This form of authority rests on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual said to possess "charisma," and to the normative pattern or order revealed, expressed, and perhaps even ordained by that figure. This is, of course, **charismatic authority**.

Before examining each of these in detail, some general remarks are in order to prevent misunderstanding.

First, these three forms of authority are not always found in their pure form. They are archetypes — posits of a pure, idealized model rather than actual specific historical phenomena — and they are not mutually exclusive. We should expect to find in any given

institutional organization more than one mode of legitimating authority, and within any society we will find different modes of legitimation operating in different institutions and organizations. The real strength of Weber's formulation, however, is that these three forms of domination range over all imaginable institutions in any given society. By that I do not mean simply government institutions. The family is an institution, and it has, in different epochs, different grounds of legitimation. Private social clubs — the Elks Lodge or the Freemasons, for instance — are institutions subsumed under one of these three categories. Political parties, state institutions, courts, and military organizations all have their own distinct modes of legitimation, drawing on one of these three pure types or mixing them.

Legal Authority

The purest form of legal authority is that which operates through a bureaucratic administrative staff — that is, as it were, the archetype of legal authority. The first historical form it took was not quite pure: it had a collegial staff. One can think of the British Parliament in its original form as just that — the king is the ruler and the Lords and Commons form the collegial staff. Weber considers this a transitional phase, however. The pure archetype is when the staff is purely bureaucratic.

This pure type of legitimate authority rests on five basic beliefs. The first is that any legal norm can be established by agreement or imposition on the basis of expediency or value, and that at least the members of the organization — that is, the staff — must accept and internalize this. That is the first of the five basic presuppositions that legitimate legal authority.

The second is that every body of law is believed to be a consistent system of abstract rules, intentionally created — hence the need for

legislative law, as opposed to common law, which is purely based on tradition.

The third is that even the officials of the bureaucratic staff and the ruler are subject to universal legal norms. Our own legal system offers an excellent example, in that our judges and government officials are all impeachable if they violate the laws under which they rule.

Fourth, a person who obeys authority does so as a "member of the organization." What is obeyed is not the ruler but the law; the ruler is simply the carrier, the bearer of the law. American legal practice illustrates this clearly: one does not obey the judge — the judge tells one what the law is, and it is the law itself that one obeys.

Fifth and finally, members of the organization obey superiors solely as placeholders in an impersonal order. This will become very important when we contrast legal with traditional authority, because what creates obedience here is not a tie of personal loyalty. One does not obey one's superior because one greatly admires the person and is therefore willing to do anything he says. One obeys him because he fills a specific spot in a hierarchy and acts according to the rules imposed by that hierarchy. One is, in effect, obeying the rules rather than the person.

Legal authority of this type is characterized by seven features. First, there is a continuous rule-bound conduct: legal authority is not only constantly imposed and enacted, but constantly imposed and enacted on the basis of written, formulated rules. Second, such legal authority has a very precisely specified sphere of competence written into the rules — there is a domain into which legal authority can intrude and a domain into which it cannot. Third, it is characterized by a hierarchical officialdom with no overlapping jurisdictions: there are distinct courts for civil cases and distinct courts for criminal cases. Fourth, there is specialized training for officials. One does not inherit

the position of an official, as one might in the House of Lords, nor gain it through the spoils system of patronage politics, which is a previous mode of domination. One must attend law school for a prescribed number of years or pass a civil service examination, a foreign service examination, and so forth. Fifth, there is a sharp disjuncture between staff members and owners. Consider a corporation, which is organized on the basis of legal bureaucratic domination — it operates on essentially the same mode. The people who staff the corporation are not its owners, and it would constitute a conflict of interest if they were: the owners are the shareholders, and the CEOs and various corporate officials are the staff members. That disjuncture must be maintained so that staff members follow rules rather than interests. Sixth, and implied by the fifth, there is a salaried compensation for the staff. Staff members are not compensated on the basis of profit but receive a fixed salary based on the proficiency of their work, which in turn produces a career orientation. This is extremely important for civil service — it is a career one enters for life. And seventh and finally, legal authority requires written orders. This cannot be overstated, and neither could Weber overstate it. If orders are spoken, there will be no record of them. Such orders will then be based on the personal loyalty of the recipient to the official above them, and are likely to change from case to case. Once written down, they fix a form from which one cannot deviate, and one can clearly determine where in the hierarchy of officialdom a particular decision originated and where responsibility should lie if a mistake has been made.

This pure form of bureaucratic administration is what Weber called *monocratic* — a single, hierarchical, pyramidal structure. Weber notes that it is technically the most efficient, and hence formally — that is, instrumentally — the most rational means of exercising authority over people. More than any other mode of legitimate domination, bureaucratic domination will consistently achieve the greatest degree

of compliance for the least expenditure of energy and will most thoroughly dominate people. Weber considered it so successful precisely because he thought it was a species of domination through knowledge. The specialized training that distinguishes legal authority from the other modes means that officials will likely have had training in behavioral psychology and various forms of legal disputation, giving them the ability to apply technical knowledge to the task of dominating people.

This pure type is found in a wide variety of institutions — many places where one might not even think to look. All large corporations operate through legal bureaucratic domination, particularly with respect to their staffs and members. Hospitals: one notices that upon entering a hospital, one is not immediately asked what is wrong — one is immediately asked to fill out a form. Schools: consider all the paperwork required. If one wishes to transfer a teacher from one public school to another in a large city, one must go to the head of the bureaucratic officialdom controlling that school system and file the correct papers. Since at least the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, priests in churches have in fact been bureaucratic officials — specifically, ever since the offices of priests ceased to be appropriable by nobles. Once one could no longer purchase a benefice for a younger brother and install him as a priest, the priesthood became a bureaucratic position filled by a hierarchy of bishops, cardinals, and various officials who study the submitted papers of applicants and fill positions on the basis of internally regulated rules. Political parties are purely bureaucratic: they have national chairmen and committees with rules, and hire many lawyers to draw up their various structures. Even modern armies over the last two centuries have become bureaucratic organizations, as reflected in such positions as chief of staff and staff sergeant, and everywhere one finds the same features: written orders, and the principle that the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff embodies the rules rather than personal charisma.

Bureaucratic domination, Weber argued, tends to produce three distinct social consequences. The first is what he called social leveling in favor of technical competence. In many societies there are all sorts of ways of distinguishing so-called better groups from worse groups — on ethnic, racial, or class grounds. Bureaucratic domination tends to undermine all such distinctions, because it is technically most feasible for a bureaucratic administration to recruit as many technically qualified people as it possibly can. It therefore tends not to notice whether one is a woman or a man, black or white, a member of this religion or that, so long as one has the requisite training and can fill the required position. Second, it tends to produce what Weber called a plutocracy, owing to its interest in extending the period of technical training for bureaucratic officials. Weber noted that by his time, in the early 20th century, there were already officials who had not completed their training until the age of thirty, and that period has only extended further in our own day. The officials themselves have an interest in extending this education as long as possible: if the training can be prolonged and is to be state-funded in preparation for a bureaucratic position, one can study until the age of sixty, work for five years, retire, and collect a pension. That tendency — to extend required education without genuine necessity — is a real interest one has to be aware of in bureaucracy. Third and finally, Weber argues that bureaucratic domination produces what he called "the spirit of cold, formalistic impersonality." It tends to create a very impersonal system of social interrelation.

Traditional Authority

So much for legal authority. Let us turn to traditional authority. Under such a system, the ruler is not a "superior" — a higher position

in an officialdom or hierarchy — but rather a personal master. The staff is not comprised of technical experts but of personal retainers, and the ruled are either comrades or subjects — those who will follow the master's orders — but never members. This represents a very different way of thinking about society. In bureaucratic legal authority we think of various people in the society as members of that society; in traditional authority one thinks of them as subjects, subject to authority.

What binds the staff to the master is personal loyalty, and obedience is owed not to some set of abstract rules but to a person — a person who holds a position of authority by tradition. Some of the master's actions are, in fact, bound by tradition, and this implies a real and significant limitation on what the master can do. If he ever transgresses his traditional rights, he runs the danger of fomenting what Weber called a traditionalist revolution. Consider the various retellings of the story of Robin Hood: Robin Hood is not arguing for a new system or for the creation of a better society. He is saying that King John has deviated from the good old ways and encroached on the traditional rights of Anglo-Saxons, and that therefore one must return to the good old ways. That is a traditionalist revolution. Most peasant revolutions are traditionalist revolutions — they do not seek to create a new society; they fear that the master is trying to create a new society, and they want to return to what they know and are comfortable with.

In such a context, the creation of law by legislation is simply out of the question. The only things that bear legitimacy are the good old ways. If one wishes to create a new law under traditional authority, one must have a scribe search the old law books for a precedent three thousand years old and argue that the good old ways have not been followed for the last two hundred years and must now be

restored. There is no basis for creating new laws other than precedent and tradition.

The staff of the ruler in traditional authority is recruited either patrimonially or extra-patrimonially. Patrimonial recruitment draws on persons who owe the chief traditional ties of personal loyalty: kinsmen, slaves, household officials, retainers, physicians, eunuchs, clients, freedmen. Among the Roman emperors, for example, slaves were often chosen as chief counselors precisely because they owed personal ties of loyalty and could be trusted. A man might similarly be freed and then made a personal retainer precisely because he owed a personal debt of gratitude. Kinsmen, of course, serve equally well. Another example: Moses Maimonides served for some time as the personal physician — and thus a close member of the staff — of the Sultan of Egypt.

Extra-patrimonial recruitment includes personal favorites, whose selection very often becomes the cause of traditionalist revolts — the choice of Buckingham, for instance, by King Charles I of England. It can also include vassals — people below the lord in the social structure who owe him a tie of obedience — and free men, not to be confused with freedmen (those who have been emancipated), but people who were born free and who voluntarily enter into service. It is this last group, Weber argues, that is often the origin of bureaucracy, since such people enter service of their own volition and very quickly begin to transform the staff into one of technical training and expertise.

In traditional rule, jurisdictions — unlike in bureaucratic rule — constantly overlap, and in fact it is a benefit if they do. Whenever a conflict arises from such overlap, it is the master or lord who adjudicates the issue, and there is a real logic to this: if the same task were delegated to two people and one performed it in such a way that the subjects were pleased while the other did not, the master

would quickly declare that the first had been acting in accordance with his authority and that the other was a usurper. That is precisely the reason for dividing such jurisdictions in that fashion. Rational or technical training for officials is, of course, completely out of the question in such a system.

Gerontocracy and primary patriarchy are forms of traditional authority without a personal staff. The traditional extended family and household — which was the locus of production until roughly the last hundred and eighty years or so — is precisely a case of gerontocracy: the older one is, the more authority one has over the household. Yet there is an important difference here: the absence of a staff means that the members of the family are not fully subjects — they are, to some extent at least, comrades.

There is another form of traditional authority which Weber called estate domination, found at certain moments in the medieval period. This is a form of patrimonial domination in which the staff appropriates particular powers and assets. In such a case, the lord's discretion in the choice of staff becomes limited — for example, when the staff is able to insist that only persons from particular families may be appointed to the house of lords. Staff members then appropriate their positions, their incomes, and most importantly the material means of administration as well as governing power, thereby marking out for themselves their own locus of power within the structure and sharply delimiting the power held by the lord. An excellent example is the feudal knight, who supplied his own armor, his own weaponry, and his own troops — which placed a sharp limitation on what any master could ask of him. The feudal knight was not truly a vassal in the fully subordinate sense, but rather a subaltern who had appropriated the means of holding his office and held them personally and privately.

Patrimonial retainers receive their support from one of five distinct sources. The first is the Lord's Table: one lives in the castle with the lord and eats at his table, and that is the entirety of what one receives. The second is allowances from the lord's magazine — a large storehouse of goods from which one receives a small portion. The third is service land, very common in Russian feudalism, for example, where holding a position for the Tsar might confer, say, five hundred serfs and ten thousand acres, but only for the duration of that position and not as an inheritance. The fourth is the appropriation of taxes, fees, or property income — for example, designating the local constable of an area to receive all mill fees from corn-grinding in that area. And the fifth, unique to Europe and — Weber thought — Japan, is the fief: a form of service land in which one actually owns the land given in return for service, land which can then pass to one's children and thus creates a permanent, inheritable nobility.

Forms two through four — the allowances from the lord's magazine, service land, and the appropriation of taxes, fees, and property income — are all what are called benefices, and when a staff is in principle supported by benefices, it is prebendal. Contemporary examples of a benefice include the priest, who receives an income from his church for as long as he holds that position, and the tenured professor, who is assured of a certain income for as long as he lives and fulfills his function, by virtue of holding that position. The fifth form, the fief, is extremely rare — it represents the beginning of a large-scale concentration of private property in the hands of individuals, and it is only out of that concentration that capitalism can emerge. Weber considered it truly unique to feudal Europe and Japan.

Finally, the effect of traditional authority on the economy: traditional authority tends to foster traditional economic attitudes, such as the

notion of a just price, a just wage, and a natural amount of income one can generate from a particular piece of property, with anything above that considered untraditional. In brief, something we might call noblesse oblige undermines the formal rationality of economic decisions and thus inhibits capitalism. One can never expect capitalism to emerge under traditional authority.

Charismatic Authority

Finally, we turn to the third form of legitimate domination: charismatic authority. Pure charismatic authorities are accorded superhuman, supernatural, or at least exceptional powers and qualities. In primitive conditions such authority may rest on magical powers — what we call witch doctors or shamans. Charismatic authorities include prophets, shamans, berserkers or warrior heroes, and certain political "demagogues." This is a very important point: charisma extends far beyond the context in which Weber originally developed the concept — literally the apostolic community — to such figures as Napoleon or Achilles, and in the modern era to warrior heroes such as Sergeant York. Even a pitcher like Orel Hershiser, pitching his arm out in pursuit of the extraordinary, is in some sense a berserker who produces something equivalent to a miracle, and the people who can recognize that immediately form bonds of loyalty to such a figure.

Those subject to charismatic authority are duty-bound to recognize its authenticity: when Christ calls you and shows you a miracle, if you recognize it as a miracle, you are duty-bound to acknowledge him as the Christ. And if you recognize that authority, you are required to respond with complete personal devotion to its possessor. If he tells you to go out and walk on water and jump off a mountain, you do it.

An organized group subject to charismatic authority is called a charismatic community rather than a staff. The prophet has his

disciples or apostles, the warlord his bodyguards, and the political leader his agents — Mussolini his subalterns, Hitler his Goebbels, and so forth. Such figures — the staff of the charismatic community — are not appointed, promoted, or dismissed, and have no career in any tangible sense. Rather, they respond to a call by the leader — "Peter, come with me, I will make you a fisher of men" — and do so solely on the basis of their own charismatic qualifications and their recognition that the leader possesses even greater charisma. There is no hierarchy in the charismatic community; everyone within it lives in communistic relations with the leader. This is found in the Acts of the Apostles, where everyone gives according to his ability and takes according to his needs, and no accounting is kept. The means of sustenance are supplied either by voluntary gift or begging, which are considered honorable, or, in the case of warriors, by conquest.

New judgments, new moral and normative patterns, are made on a case-by-case basis — there is no rational, rule-bound decision-making — and are considered, once made, divine judgments or revelations. Charismatic figures always demand or preach new obligations, the recognition of which is a duty for those charismatically qualified. Christ says: "You have heard that it was written, but I say unto you." He preaches on the Sabbath against convention and announces completely unheralded obligations. In this sense charismatic authority is truly revolutionary: it creates a whole new set of demands and goals which had never previously been conceived. It is, in fact, the revolutionary force in traditional epochs. When traditional authority is in place and a genuine substantive revolution occurs, it will almost always be led by a charismatic figure — a Luther, a Calvin, a Hus.

The only basis for legitimacy that charismatic communities recognize is personal charisma, and that personal charisma is recognized only as long as it continues to produce miracles. In the realm of warrior

charisma, this is illustrated very clearly: in Homer's *Iliad*, when Achilles and Agamemnon contend for the position of charismatic authority, Agamemnon holds his position only as long as he can win battles. The moment he begins to lose, the community turns to Achilles and says: whatever you want, you have it — you are paramount. One finds this in virtually any sporting context: the great player on a team is unquestioned as long as he can get the job done, and the moment he cannot, everyone turns to whoever can and calls that person a "leader," regardless of what he is like off the field. It is the ability to produce miracles that confers the authority.

Charismatic authority also opposes traditional or rational economizing and regular income. If one is a charismatic figure, one cannot hold a job, and if one is part of a charismatic community, neither can one. The reason is that regular employment undermines the claim to otherworldliness. The only legitimate ways for a charismatic figure to obtain means are begging, or for warriors, conquest — never a regular source of income, because regular income attaches one to this world rather than the other world and forecloses the claim of transcendence.

The one drawback to charismatic authority is that it is inherently unstable and becomes either traditionalized, rationalized, or both. This routinization is in part a result of the followers' ideal or material interests in the movement after the death of the leader — a consideration Weber examines specifically in the context of the apostolic community. After Christ's death, the disciples could simply have gone home, lived their lives, and read the text. Instead, they had either an ideal interest in believing themselves chosen or a material interest in acquiring power over a new church, and so had to keep the movement alive and find a new leader structure. Such routinization devolves on the method by which the new leader is

chosen, and Weber identifies six such methods that account for all of human history.

First, one can search for a new leader on the basis of established criteria. The example Weber draws is the choice of the new Dalai Lama: whenever the head of the Tibetan Buddhist sect dies, his successor is sought among children who display the requisite signs, and the one found with just the right qualities is identified as an avatar, a *bodhisattva*. Second, it can be done by revelation manifest in oracles, lots, or similar means — placing the names of potential leaders in a bowl and drawing one, which is then held to have been chosen by God. Third, the old leader can designate his successor — which is in fact what happened in the apostolic community, when Christ said to Simon: "You will be the rock of my church," renaming him Peter and designating him as the one to take over after his death. Fourth, there can be designation by a charismatically qualified staff followed by recognition by the community, which may require unanimity. In the charismatic elements of Protestant, and particularly Puritan, churches, for example, a minister was elected by a community of saints who had demonstrated their own charismatic qualification, and the call was very often required to be unanimous. Fifth, hereditary charisma can be imposed: primogeniture in medieval Europe and Japan provides the example, where noble families derived from warrior — that is, berserker — charisma agreed that the eldest male would inherit the charisma, and as long as the population could be brought to believe that such charisma was heritable, the arrangement could be legitimated. And sixth, there is office charisma: once one takes a particular office and performs a particular set of acts, the charisma attaches not to one's person but to the office itself, and is conferred upon its holder. This may be accomplished through acts of initiation — for example, the laying on of hands, which appears in the Acts of the Apostles and remains to this day the act of ordination. The laying on of hands presumably

confers office charisma on a figure who may not have possessed personal charisma beforehand, which provides the basis for the medieval Catholic doctrine that even a sinful priest can effectively administer the means of salvation through the sacraments, since once ordained he is suffused with the charisma of the office. The supreme example is of course the papacy, the highest form of office charisma, which is notably chosen by the designation of a charismatically qualified community: the College of Cardinals.

Democratic Charisma and Illegitimate Domination

Finally, I want to mention something Weber considered very important: that charismatic authority can be transformed in a "democratic" direction. This means that public recognition is not the result of legitimacy but rather its basis. The notion here is that the charisma of the ruler and the society becomes diffused to all of its members. In our own system, therefore, we say the charismatic authority resides in the people — the folk, the Americans, whatever one calls them — and whatever they choose confers legitimacy. When they get together in an election and fifty percent plus one of them vote for a particular figure, that immediately confers legitimacy on that person. The elected figure does not personally possess the charisma; the society as a whole, as a people, holds it. That is the basis of democratic legitimacy.

I want also to mention one further form of what Weber contrasts with each of these modes: something he calls illegitimate domination, found in the city. For Weber, what we would call republican or democratic-republican government is not a legitimate form of domination — because it is not domination at all. What one originally finds in the Greek city-states, in the cities of medieval Europe, and in the cities of the Hanseatic League, is that each person in the society who bears arms holds a certain amount of power and never confers it on anyone else. Domination is therefore never

legitimated, because there is no domination to legitimate: each person is the power holder. And in that sense, whenever governments do something the citizens dislike, they simply remove them from office.

That was the contrast Weber set up against these pure legitimate forms of domination. And while he tried not to be political, I think it was very clear that he was afraid that rational domination — legal authority — would come to dominate this century and eliminate the possibility of the city.

Lecture 9: Taking the Long View — Arnold Toynbee and World Historical Speculation

Arnold Toynbee was one of a series of important scholars who, in the years directly following the First World War, attempted to discover or examine the course of civilizations and of history in the broadest possible sweep. It is worth briefly explaining the significance of that historical context. As late twentieth-century descendants of that epoch, we tend to think of "the big one," the Great War, as the Second World War — and that tendency often obscures for us the significance the First World War had for Europeans and Westerners generally. Up to that point, as we have seen in much of the historical speculation we have surveyed, there existed a widespread belief in unlimited progress. The worst period of European warfare — the religious wars of the seventeenth century — had come and gone. The Napoleonic Wars, which had swept across the European continent, had been brought to a close through the Congress of Vienna and the Concert of Europe, fostering a belief and a hope that war had been transcended, at least within European civilization. While imperial wars persisted — in Africa, in Asia, in the Crimea — there were very few wars on the European continental mainland, and those that did occur were relatively brief and relatively contained affairs, such as the Austro-Prussian and the Franco-Prussian Wars. There was a growing hope and belief that war had finally ceased to be a major problem among European powers, and that future competition between nations would take the form of economic exchange, with a growing internationalism and cosmopolitanism within the European order.

It was for this reason that the First World War devastated what Hegel might have called the European spirit. It was an immense bloodletting. The millions who died constituted an absolutely devastating blow to the populations of those societies, to say nothing of the incredible waste of resources and the destruction of the land itself. Add to this the particularly brutal form the warfare took — a form against which, in certain respects, the Second World War actually seems like a relief. Battles were always inconclusive in the First World War. Trench warfare was perhaps the most psychologically and physically debilitating form of combat imaginable. Chemical warfare was a technique resorted to by both sides. The old tactics of parry and maneuver had been bogged down by the development of weapons of mass destruction. The First World War thus represented more than mere bloodletting — it was as if Europe had opened its veins. The scholars who emerged from that struggle could not help but ask what it portended for the West, for Western civilization. Might it not signal decline, if not disintegration and the end, of all that had been built — all the great achievements of the West? Add to this the rapid emergence of Bolshevism in what became the Soviet Union, fascism in Italy and Spain, and Nazism in Germany, and one can understand why various scholars searched the historical record to determine whether this was a time of troubles from which the West might ever hope to recover. Several scholars engaged in this effort; one of the more famous is Oswald Spengler. But perhaps the most famous, the most important, and certainly the broadest in sweep and analysis was Arnold Toynbee.

Like others of his generation, Toynbee was concerned to discover whether the cataclysmic struggle that had convulsed European culture had ended, or at least signaled the end of, Western civilization. His work is impressive in both scope and scale. Even the abridged version of his original ten- or twelve-volume study is a

massive tome, and the wealth of information it contains is absolutely astounding.

Civilizations as the Units of Historical Analysis

Toynbee's analysis takes the form of a comparative study of civilizations across time and across space, and behind it lies a fundamental assumption: that civilizations, not nations, peoples, or races, are the proper units of historical analysis. His reason is that there is a fundamental unity to a civilization — a unity of its culture, its institutions, its mores, and its mentality — and it is that unity which makes cultures and forms of life coherent objects of study. It is an exhaustive study, and Toynbee identifies roughly twenty-three civilizations — roughly, because the number is either twenty-three or twenty-one depending on whether one regards Russian Orthodox society as a distinct but affiliated civilization or as part of the same civilization as Greek Orthodox society, and a similar question arises with Japanese civilization and its relationship to Sinic culture. The time span within which these civilizations emerge, grow, and decline is roughly the last six thousand years. Within that span, many of these civilizations are affiliated to one another through various forms and techniques of affiliation that we will discuss.

Toynbee is aware, however, that given the broad natural history of the human species, six thousand years is quite recent. The species has been around for a very long time — Paleolithic and Neolithic man, that is to say village-oriented, sedentary-agricultural man, predates civilization by a very substantial margin, with Neolithic man being at least fifty thousand years old. Civilizations are therefore, in the lifespan of our species, a very recent development, and for that reason they constitute a fruitful domain for comparative history. Even spanning the entire distance between Sumer and modern Europe, they are, on the large scale of things, rough contemporaries, and as such they constitute a legitimate domain for comparative analysis.

Toynbee also argues, as we will see toward the end, that there is yet another subject of analysis beyond civilization, which may in fact constitute an even higher form of human sociability: the universal church. He suggests that the highest form of human community we can aspire to is an ecumenical brotherhood among the four great axial world religions — Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

The Genesis of Civilizations

Let us begin with the question of the genesis of civilizations. Roughly six civilizations emerged from what we might call the cake of custom. Traditional Neolithic and primitive societies tend to be preservative in their ways of life, organized around extremely archetypal and ritualistic action in which very little changes. That cake of custom preserves the society intact, without growth, without development, without any internal transformation. Six of these societies, however, produced civilizations. The mechanism Toynbee proposes to explain this breakthrough to history is what he calls challenge and response: a society or community is faced with some adversity, some challenge, to which the only efficacious response is a civilizing innovation.

There are several kinds of challenges that can be faced. The first and most notable are physical challenges. These are the challenges confronted most dramatically by the first hydraulic civilizations — river valley civilizations whose agriculture depends on massive irrigation works. The challenge facing Mesopotamia, Egypt, the ancient Sinic civilization, and the Indus and Ganges River Valley civilizations was the task of recuperating marshy swamplands and managing the problem of regular flooding, which devastated the human communities that would otherwise have done quite well on the rich, silt-laden land. The solution was the first form of hydraulic civilization: a hierarchical city-state run by priestly scholars who had developed writing and astronomical observation so as to predict the timing of floods, supervise the construction of massive irrigation

works, and coordinate the management of dikes across entire river systems, knowing when the seasons were changing and when rains were to be expected.

A similar kind of physical challenge faces island peoples and seafaring peoples. The Polynesians and the Minoan civilization are examples: the sea presents a formidable challenge, the response to which is the development of ocean-going vessels, which in turn facilitates the growth of trade. A third kind of challenge comes from what Toynbee calls blows — direct physical force exerted against a community that forces it to respond with some innovation capable of meeting the threat. The Hellenic Greeks emerge as a major civilization in response to the challenge posed by the Persian Empire at Marathon and subsequently, developing specific techniques such as the phalanx as a form of military organization, which in turn produced a democratization of government. The Chinese civilization, threatened by nomadic barbarians, developed an extremely cohesive internal social structure and built the Great Wall of China — a classic example of a response to a challenge.

Finally, there is the challenge of what Toynbee calls penalties: when a particular group is subjected to specific disabilities because of its membership in that group, it may well respond with innovations that ultimately lead to its success. The Roman slaves and freedmen who were denied citizenship within the empire responded by embracing Christianity as a world religion that gave them a sense of membership and community — and very quickly, that institution and that faith came to conquer the empire of which they were formally excluded members. Christians in the Ottoman Empire, subjected to higher taxes and denied full citizenship, responded by developing their merchant abilities and literary skills to the point where they emerged as the best civil servants in the Ottoman order, until Muslims demanded the right to serve in their own state's

administration. And there is the example of Jews in the West who, when faced with penalties throughout their history and banned from landowning, responded by engaging in trade with such intensity and skill that the great banking house of Europe in the era of absolutism was that of the Rothschilds — a direct response to a challenge.

It should be noted, however, that too much adversity — too strong a challenge — can lead to stagnation. The best example Toynbee draws upon is that of the Eskimos, who face the most dramatic challenge confronted by any group of humans on the planet. They have succeeded admirably in eking out a livelihood in a frozen wasteland, but the challenge was so severe that all available resources must be deployed simply to maintain survival, and the result is that the society stagnated and was unable to develop further. What is needed for civilization to develop is, in effect, a golden mean — a challenge that is neither too light nor too crushing. The extreme of too light a challenge is illustrated by tropical peoples living in such abundance that there is no pressure to develop civilization; the extreme of too severe a challenge is illustrated by the Eskimos. Every successful response, moreover, always evokes a new challenge, and each time a challenge is successfully met, the civilization that meets it builds an élan, a self-confidence, which carries it forward to face the next one. Toynbee's analogy is that of a mountain climber who, reaching each successive peak, gains greater confidence in his ability to climb.

The Growth of Civilizations

We have seen how civilizations begin; we turn now to their growth. A society, for Toynbee, is not an organic unity in the Hegelian sense. It is simply a structure or system of relations among individuals — not a supernatural entity, not some organic phenomenon, but a straightforward set of interpersonal relations. Within any society, all growth, all successful responses to challenges, come not from some

world spirit or the spirit of a people, but from individuals — usually from a handful of creative individuals. The mechanism these individuals employ is what Toynbee calls withdrawal and return. Such individuals withdraw from their society temporarily, either psychologically or physically, generally in pursuit of personal enlightenment or to resolve some spiritual or philosophical difficulty that has troubled them. They achieve the enlightenment and then return to convert the rest of society to the innovation they have achieved. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this pattern is exemplified in the lives of the prophets, all of whom retreat into the mountains or into the desert for a time, have some powerful conversion experience, confront God in some way, and then return to deliver the message to the people.

This conversion of the wider population is achieved largely through what Toynbee calls mimesis, or drill. Very few people are capable of sustaining the same level of enlightenment as the creative individual, but what they are capable of doing is being taught, through ritual, to imitate certain acts by rote. As long as those acts prove efficacious, people will engage in that drill. As a society grows and evolves, it is accompanied by further social differentiation, and the different elements that emerge through that differentiation achieve differing degrees of mimesis or conversion to the teaching of the creative individuals.

The Breakdown of Civilizations

Most civilizations are dead. Of the twenty-three Toynbee identifies, most have come and gone and no longer exist. Of the handful that remain, all but one have already broken down; the only one Toynbee considers not clearly broken down is Western civilization. What causes a breakdown? It begins with a transformation among the creative individuals. The creative minority — that handful of exceptional individuals who have driven civilizational growth —

ceases at some point to be creative and degenerates into what Toynbee calls a dominant minority. Consider the Christian monks: at one point they were a creative minority, withdrawing from society and returning with mystical teachings and insights into the nature of communion with God. Over time, however, they degenerated into a simply dominant minority, resting on the laurels of past achievements, accumulating large landholdings, and becoming rentiers who extracted dues, alms, and tithes from serfs and peasants.

The second element of breakdown occurs when the majority of society withdraws its allegiance from the dominant minority and from the society itself. With that withdrawal comes the abandonment of mimesis — they cease to engage in the ritual patterns that were once drilled into them by a creative minority. This naturally leads to the third element: a decline of social unity. No longer is there a sense of a common project shared by all members of the society. Increasingly, social differentiation is accompanied by a sense of exclusive particular allegiances — the Roman plebeian no longer feels himself a Roman but simply a plebeian; the Roman patrician no longer thinks of himself primarily as a Roman but as a large holder of latifundia who may share interests with large-scale proprietors of other civilizations entirely.

What causes creative minorities to become merely dominant? One possibility is that they become infected by the mechanicalness of their followers. Mimesis, after all, is literally a mechanical ritual — a liturgical process in which fixed words are learned by rote and fixed acts are performed at fixed moments in a fixed sequence. This mechanism can infect the creative minority itself, causing it to become purely formalistic. Another possibility is that the creative minority begins fetishistically to preserve outdated institutions or techniques. It fails to see that the old techniques developed in the

old institutions were means toward an end — strategies for bringing about a particular result — and instead, in an antiquarian fashion, it valorizes them simply because they are old. When that happens, the minority has ceased to be creative and has become merely dominant.

Militarism further accelerates this process. As a dominant minority becomes more and more militaristic, it ceases to be innovative and becomes increasingly conservative, and this tendency is paradoxically worsened by victory. The more victories won by a militaristic dominant minority, the more conservative it becomes. Sparta is the pre-eminent example: it achieved a remarkable success through its militaristic organization of society and very quickly developed an incredibly static social order, devoid of dynamism or change, atrophying as a result of its successes rather than its failures.

There is also a more structural reason to expect creative minorities to become dominant over time. It is rare and difficult to sustain creative responses to challenges indefinitely. As new challenges emerge, we would expect different minorities to emerge to meet them. But once the minority that achieved a prior creativity establishes itself as a powerful group, it tends to refuse to acknowledge the emergence of new creative minorities. The trial and sentencing of Socrates serves as a compelling example — an old dominant minority refusing to acknowledge the emergence of a new creative minority in the Socratic philosophical circle and its teachings.

When this process of breakdown begins, the leading edge of the society has become merely dominant and exploitive. The followers of the previously creative group become disaffected — Toynbee calls such a group a proletariat — and in spirit at least, in their loyalties, they have seceded from their civilization.

Disintegration

Following breakdown comes the process of disintegration, in which society is split into three crucial elements. The first is the dominant minority. The second is an internal proletariat — a disaffected majority no longer willing to follow the drill and mimesis of that minority. The third, and in some cases the most important of all, is an external proletariat: the barbarians who live at the borders of the civilization. As long as the minority was creative, these barbarians engaged in their own form of mimesis, retaining trading rights and aspiring perhaps to become part of the civilization. Once that minority becomes exclusively dominant, the barbarians' admiration turns to hatred.

Each of these groups produces different institutions and responds to disintegration in different ways. The dominant minority rallies around universal states — it creates a new sense of order by enlarging the domain of government and building huge empires. One thinks of the Mauryan Empire in India, the Han Empire in China, the Roman Empire over the Hellenic world, the empire of Alexander over the same, and the Persian Empire. The internal proletariat, having seceded in spirit from the civilization, produces during periods of disintegration what Toynbee calls universal churches. The internal proletariat of the Roman Empire produced Christianity; the internal proletariat of the Persian Empire's barbarian fringe produced Islam; the internal proletariat of India produced both Hinduism in its final synthesis and Buddhism. The external proletariat, once fully disaffected, no longer wishes to imitate the civilization — it forms barbarian war bands, the Ostrogoths and Visigoths and Mongols.

The only alternative to disintegration, once it has begun, is what Toynbee calls petrification: a society can literally freeze in its development and remain stuck at a particular moment for an extended period. The classic example is Egypt. After being overrun by the Hyksos during the Middle Kingdom, Egyptian society became

extraordinarily conservative, retaining its most archaic beliefs and, when the challenge of a creative minority tried to bring monotheism to it under the Pharaoh Akhenaten, dismissing that innovation with remarkable speed and returning to the traditional priestly religion of polytheism with inexplicable fervor. The result is that ancient Egypt lasted longer than any other civilization — but in a petrified state, without development or growth.

During periods of disintegration, one also observes a proliferation of alternative lifestyles: people dropping out, embracing hermeticism, engaging in dissolution. The responses on the part of individual lives to the psychosocial pressures of disintegration range from decadent abandon — the sort of thing one finds in a Caligula, a Nero, or a Commodus — all the way to martyrdom, in the manner of St. Sebastian or St. Stephen. Such disintegration always follows what Toynbee calls a time of troubles, and the process has a characteristic rhythm. The breakdown period and the period of disintegration together take hundreds of years, and they follow a recurrent pattern: challenge, crisis, brief rally, crisis, brief rally — and Toynbee observes that in most civilizations the rhythm resolves into a three-and-a-half beat cycle of crisis and rally before the final dissolution.

Universal States

One of the great rallying points that holds together a civilization on the verge of disintegration is the creation of a universal state. Universal states are a response to a time of troubles, which typically takes the form of an internal civil war within the civilization. The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and their respective alliances constitutes precisely such a civil war within the Greek civilization, the response to which — after immense bloodletting across Greece — was the creation of a universal state in the form of the Macedonian Empire, begun by Philip of Macedon and extended by his son Alexander the Great. Similarly, the Roman Civil Wars — the

intermittent struggles between patrician families and the tumult surrounding the Gracchi on behalf of the plebeians — produced, after their own immense bloodletting, a universal state in the Roman Empire under the Caesars. The Mauryan Empire of the Indian subcontinent emerged from a time of troubles involving civil wars between the Rajas, in which the cohesion of Ganges civilization was secured by the establishment of a single large empire. A similar process occurred in China.

Universal states are, in a sense, tragic. They always ultimately fail in their declared purpose of ending the time of troubles and bringing universal peace. The Roman Empire falls, the Mauryan Empire falls. Yet they do serve another purpose: they create institutional arrangements that facilitate the growth of the universal religions produced by the internal proletarians. The vast network of roads the Romans built facilitated Paul's journeys throughout the empire and his proselytization on behalf of the Christian faith. The development of regular postal communications made it easier to disseminate the ideas of universal, faith-based religion. The emergence of a lingua franca — Latin within the Roman Empire, Greek within the Alexandrian Empire — meant that people of different ethnicities and different backgrounds could communicate in a common tongue.

Universal Churches

Universal churches serve two functions. First, they serve as what Toynbee calls chrysalises — bridges between affiliated civilizations. Christianity, for instance, preserved what remained of the disintegrating Roman and Hellenic civilization and maintained that legacy to hand it over to the emerging Western civilization that would grow from it. Hinduism serves the exact same function as Indian civilization passed through its Mauryan stage and re-emerged later under the Guptas. Second and more profoundly, universal churches constitute a higher order of society than that found in

civilization itself. In a universal church, the principle of membership is purely spiritual and therefore purely voluntary. One thereby has a system of human relations and sociability based on consent and voluntary submission, with all members devoted to the one God — whether that God be called Allah, Jehovah, Jesus Christ, the Bodhisattva, or Vishnu.

The greatest danger that faces any universal church is ecclesiastical militancy, which can lead to the breakaway of affiliated civilizations. It was the ecclesiastical militancy of the Catholic Church that produced, in part, Protestantism. And it was the ecclesiastical militancy of all Christian churches together that produced modern Western secular society: it was precisely because the church carried the sword that people fled from it.

Heroic Ages

Heroic ages always begin at a frontier between a universal state and the barbarians beyond it. The barbarians no longer wish to participate in the civilization — the minority has become exclusively dominant — but they inevitably learn from the dominant minority at the frontier: its military techniques, its strategies, its technologies. Before long, they learn to triumph over that civilization and overrun it. The result is in a sense tragic: once the barbarians conquer, they have no capacity to maintain what they have conquered, and the result is invariably a dark age, a period of barbarism. Yet heroic ages also produce certain boons. The great epics of world literature all come from barbarian heroic ages: Homer's *Iliad*, Homer's *Odyssey*, the *Mahabharata*, the great chivalric epics. Once these ages end, no more epics are written. Heroic ages also serve as links between civilizations of successive generations — it is the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and Franks who link, in some essential sense, Hellenic civilization with Western Christendom.

Contacts Between Civilizations in Space

Toynbee is concerned primarily, in his analysis of contacts between civilizations in space, with the contact between modern Western civilization and all of its contemporaries. He notes that Western civilization is fundamentally a middle-class civilization: the small entrepreneur, the businessman, the professional constitute its most creative minority and its defining model. Whenever Western civilization comes into contact with another civilization that also has a middle class, that middle class and that civilization welcomes the encounter, because it means the ability to assimilate the mores of the West and compete with it successfully. Civilizations that lack a middle class but wish nonetheless to compete with the West — which they must, given the West's power — must train an artificial middle class, which Toynbee calls an intelligentsia: a professional and educated group trained to assimilate Western civilization's norms and practices. Scientists and engineers are obvious examples. And of course the predictable result follows: these educated elites always turn against their masters. It is precisely the educated elites of the developing world who produce nationalist revolutions against the West — Lenin, who held a doctorate in law; Ho Chi Minh, who had studied in Paris; Che Guevara, who was a trained physician; Fidel Castro, the son of a wealthy planter.

Contacts Between Civilizations in Time

Toynbee also examines what he calls contacts between civilizations in time — the attempt at a rebirth or reemergence of a previously dead civilization, what we know as a renaissance. Some renaissances are launched by dynastic rulers, the most notable example being the Carolingian Renaissance under Charlemagne. These efforts are never successful when launched by dynastic rulers alone, because a civilization must develop to a sufficient level before it can

successfully summon the ghost of a past civilization. The Carolingian Renaissance was abortive; genuine success only came with Petrarch.

Law and Freedom in History

On the question of law and freedom in history, Toynbee takes a broadly naturalistic view. He rejects the Hegelian position that there is no mechanical, law-like dimension to human behavior and human history, on what he regards as the most intuitive and obvious grounds: if there is no law-like behavior, then what exactly do actuaries at insurance companies do? What do economists studying the business cycle do? What do military historians studying cycles of war and peace do? There are plainly law-like regularities in human behavior — that is why different people pay different automobile insurance rates. Even major mental and cultural changes within a society occur over specifiable intervals, and Toynbee finds that these consistently follow a three-generation cycle — a rhythm he connects to the depth psychology of the unconscious as it was being developed in his time by figures such as C. G. Jung. It takes a certain generational distance from a founding patriarch, he argues, to make a fundamental break with the past possible.

The Prospects of Western Civilization

Toynbee is quite candid about why he wrote the study. After the First World War, he was struck by its resemblance to the Peloponnesian War — Athens versus Sparta bearing a troubling similarity to Germany versus England and France — and he feared this was the time of troubles signaling the end of the West. Nevertheless, Western civilization had clearly not yet begun to disintegrate in full; the massive disaffection had not yet set in. Whether the West must decline, and whether it must follow the pattern of previous civilizations, is not foreordained. The historical record can be learned from. Certain problems remain acute, above all the problem of

militarism and war, which the First World War demonstrated had not yet been solved — a prophetic observation given the approach of the Second World War.

Nonetheless, the West has mounted remarkable responses to challenges in certain directions. Technologically, it is the most sophisticated civilization the world has ever seen. The abolition of slavery across the nineteenth-century New World is, in Toynbee's view, one of the most remarkable breakthroughs in human history and a sign of continuing creativity. The advancement of women's rights — something without precedent or parallel in the rest of the world — is similarly a sign of the West's vitality and its capacity to extend the human community in directions previously unimagined. The spread of democracy and mass institutions of education are further evidence. He also discusses the possibility of a future world order organized on something like the model of the United Nations, in which that body would exercise sovereign authority; and he suggests an alternative route, a universal state led by the Americans. As an Englishman, Toynbee is admirably candid about the Americans: they are, he concedes, extremely violent, militaristic, crude, and bumptious in the manner every European is inclined to note — but they are also, he argues, the most magnanimous of peoples, the most universal in their morality, the most likely of any people to live up to their own ideals, and the most disinterested in their foreign policy. This is not merely a reflection of gratitude for the American intervention in the First World War; it appears to be a genuinely broad and fair long-range assessment of America relative to the other nations.

Toynbee is also well aware that a new world order, however successfully constructed, should not be mistaken for a utopian panacea. Dangers would remain. One is the mechanization of life: achieving greater wealth and prosperity for all members of society,

doing away with the discontent of an internal proletariat — whether that takes the form of an underclass or a working class — would require greater division of labor, automation, and technological innovation, and the result would be precisely the mechanization of life that Huxley warned against in *Brave New World*. Another danger is the potential decline of liberty. Achieving true fairness in society would require the elimination of certain freedoms, since it is freedom that produces inequality, and it is inequality that produces dynamism. Even if all of this were successfully achieved, moreover, it would not in itself ensure our happiness.

Lecture 10: Twentieth-Century Neo-Idealism — R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History*

I would like now to turn to one of the more important interpretive strategies in historiography and philosophy of history in the twentieth century: the movement I call neo-idealism. We are going to examine one particular text — the Epilegomena to R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History*.

First, a word or two about neo-idealism. Neo-idealism was a movement in the first half of the twentieth century which emerged in many different European nations and which very strongly attempted to extract what its proponents saw as the valid and rational essence of the Hegelian system without its most vulgar excesses. I will discuss what that means in a moment. Neo-idealism has had an extremely profound effect on the writing and analysis of history. To some extent, it has been one of the most dominant modes of historical analysis in this century, including in American historiography.

Some of the famous names of this movement are figures like Benedetto Croce in Italy, to some extent Leo Strauss — a man at least partly inspired by Hegelianism — at the University of Chicago, and, of course, Robin Collingwood. Collingwood was, however, an historian as well as a philosopher, and his work is therefore an example of this idealist movement which is not only philosophically insightful but also informed by the realities of actual historical scholarship. There is a sensitivity to the real practices of the historian, as opposed to the large schematizations of the armchair historian-philosopher.

Collingwood's neo-idealism eliminates, like Croce's, several of the worst excesses of Hegel's system. For example, Collingwood makes no claim to any analysis of history as a whole. He offers no interpretation of the meaning of all of history, its trajectory, where it has been, and where it is going. It embraces no particular political agenda. It comes, in fact, in a variety of ideological guises from left to right. But what it shares with Hegelianism is a commitment to an idealist reading of historical action, as well as a commitment to historicism.

It should be noted right away that Collingwood's book is not just a work on philosophy of history; it is a history of history as well. The first section of the book deals with the idea of history as it has come to us through the ages, from Thucydides and the ancient epoch right up to his own day. We are going to ignore that part and deal with the last section, the Epilegomena, which details his philosophy of history, his theory of history, and his model of historical interpretation and analysis.

In the case of Collingwood and twentieth-century neo-idealism, idealism means that actions are always read or interpreted as the expression of a particular thought, mentality, or culture. This thought — this intellectual or ideal content, one might call it reason — is

what explains these actions or these events. Understanding the mentality or the thought behind an event or an action gives us an insight, an understanding, an explanation — a key not only to interpreting but to explaining that event or action.

As mentioned previously, historicism means that historical events are unique, that all culture and all conceptions are rooted in historical realities — in realities of space and time — and that there is no super-historical or supra-historical ground of judgment or criticism. We are all rooted in a particular place and moment in time, and our criteria of judgment are always historically rooted; we cannot, as it were, get outside of our historical skins. This also means that reason and rationality themselves are a historically developing cultural modality or activity. There is no abstract reason which transcends its development in time. What is rational is therefore a function of the development of reason or rational cognitive activity up to a particular moment and not beyond.

The Science of Human Nature

I want to turn then to what seem to me to be the major themes in Collingwood's work — themes which we have seen before in previous lectures. History for Collingwood is indeed the science of human nature, that project we had heard of in the Enlightenment. Collingwood argues that the Enlightenment science of human nature failed essentially because of its false analogy to the natural sciences. The notion was that the mind was an eternal, constant structure of modalities, of cognitive apprehensions, and of emotional proclivities — that there was a fixed and set human nature. This, of course, Collingwood considers mistaken. Human psychology changes over time. Our character changes. Our features change as we evolve through history. Mind — that core to which we attempt to get in our science of human nature — can only be understood through its operations. Those operations always occur in time. Mind can thus

only be understood in its actions over time, which is history. History therefore discloses the science of the human mind as it develops across time and space.

This should never be confused with psychology. Psychology studies what Collingwood called mere consciousness. He means a purely phenomenal apprehension of mental states — states of anger, pleasure, joy, and other emotional states, as well as mental awareness of physical states like pain, discomfort, and hunger. He wants to distinguish that part of our mental life from what he calls thought: the rational activity, the purely cognitive part of mind. It is that rational activity, that thought, which is in fact disclosed by history, which is the science of human nature.

What history unfolds, according to idealism, is the development of thought — thought being the unique part of the human mind. Since all animals with neural structures have the same phenomenal awareness we do — they all feel pain and pleasure, have various proclivities, and feel affection perhaps (anyone who has ever had a dog knows that dogs feel affection of some sort or another) — all of those emotional responses are shared by other animals. What is unique to humans is the cognitive part of mind: the ability to posit thought, rational activity, and conception.

The Inside and Outside of Events

The fundamental distinction that informs all of Collingwood's thinking is between what he calls the two features of an event. He speaks of every event, or every action, as having an inside and an outside. This is a very hard doctrine. Let me begin with what the outside is, because that is much more straightforward. The outside of an event is its physical manifestation. The outside of this lecture is the particular motions that I go through — my walking, my gesturing with my hand, and the various sounds I produce from my larynx and

my lungs. All of these features, these physical aspects, can be described naturalistically and can be reduced to a scientific, anatomical, or biological description. That is what characterizes the outside of events. It is, as it were, the physical shell through which we see events. So the outside of events is always the purely physical, the purely naturalistic.

Once I have accounted for the outside, the nature of what is supposed to be on the inside — the good stuff — becomes clearer. The inside is the rational thought that lies behind an event, the principles that inform it, that which the event expresses in terms of cognitive activity or ideal development.

For Collingwood, the key point is that history proper is really the history of thought, or the insides of events. There is thus no history of nature, because natural events have no insides. There is no thought expressed in the activity of bees, in geological developments, or in changes in forestation patterns. They have no insides; thus natural history is called history by convenience only. It is not really history. History proper is always the study of the inside of events — events that have insides.

This not only excludes non-human activity; it also excludes certain human activities. Some of our actions are purely instinctual, purely mechanical, purely naturalistic. For Collingwood, there is no history of sanitation or of people's dietary habits unless those things somehow express some thought or conception. They are not part of history. There is no history of the development of the human musculature. That would be part of a natural science, perhaps a natural history, but not history proper. Only those actions and events which contain a latent insight — an expression of thought, of conception, some ideal characteristic — are part of the subject matter of history.

In this sense, we can see that Collingwood is offering a somewhat watered-down version of the classic idealist dualism between two metaphysical realms: the metaphysical realm of nature, of pure law-like behavior, and the other realm — the realm of spirit, of mind, of freedom, whether conceived as Kantian autonomy or something else. It is with the latter that history is concerned.

Reenactment and the A Priori Imagination

History works, and history explains, and the historian functions by, in fact, reenacting past experience. This is a very strange doctrine. At first, it might seem as if Collingwood is enjoining us to march across the Rubicon again in order to understand what Caesar did. Rather, what Collingwood is arguing is that what the historian does when he tries to understand something is to recover the inside of an event by putting himself, in his own mind, in the position of the agents in question. So we recover the inside of the event of Caesar's crossing the Rubicon by thinking ourselves into the situation of Caesar. Caesar was faced with a fundamental challenge. Crassus has died in Mesopotamia. Pompey has now tried to use the Senate to exclude Caesar from power and to rob him of his army. What must Caesar have been thinking when he crossed the Rubicon? What did that express? It clearly expressed the desire for the creation of imperial power on Caesar's part.

What we are doing, in fact, when we reenact the past is really reenacting the thought of the past, the inside of the event, the historical nugget contained within some action. That can only be done through the use of what Collingwood calls the a priori imagination. It is a distinctly Kantian notion. We all have some schematization of what a society must be like, of what a situation must be like. When we try to reenact some past experience, when we think ourselves into the position of Caesar, we try to embellish what

circumstances are missing, perhaps, from a direct account of Caesar's actions by imagining what must have been the case.

We do not know exactly what occurred in Lincoln's mind in the process of constructing the Gettysburg Address. But we can in our imagination imagine the circumstances that must have lain before him. He must have been thinking about his upcoming election. He must have been thinking about the New York City draft riots which had just occurred and which could not have helped but impact him. He must have been thinking about the incredible dissension that was occurring in the North as Northerners debated whether this war was really worth fighting, given the immense carnage that had just happened at that battle. The a priori imagination for the historian — a priori meaning before the facts, before we actually know what happened — allows us to conjecture and fill in the details of a social circumstance which we might not have, but which we must construct or add. Otherwise, we simply will not have enough data to go along.

The a priori imagination not only bridges the gap between sources and actions; it also helps us provide a continuous narrative. We know Caesar crosses the Rubicon. We also know that, at some point later, he takes care of Pompey. We do not actually have a record of each step he made. It is the a priori historical imagination which leads us to conclude he must have marched from point A to point B. It fills in the gaps between our evidence and supplies us with a continuous narrative, a straightforward story that overcomes the spaces. We find this registered in historical accounts whenever we see words like "perhaps," "must have," or "surely." Surely Lincoln must have been aware of the ramifications of the Emancipation Proclamation. We do not know that he did. But it is certainly plausible that he did, and that is the function of the historical a priori imagination: to supply those details from our own basic conceptions of how a period operates and how a society operates.

The historical a priori imagination, in accord with historicism, is always relative to its time. When we think of how a society must operate, our model will always be our own society and our own experiences. We may be able to enrich that through reenacting past experiences, getting a richer sense of how previous societies must have worked. But it can never be an absolute cognition. It is always something which is, to some extent, relative to our own range of experience.

The a priori imagination turns out also to be a criterion of evaluation and judgment. When we come across a document or chronicle as an historian, do we treat it as an authority — saying that whatever is in it is either true or false, including it if true and rejecting it if false? Or do we treat it as a source and perhaps read it in such a way as to reveal what hidden conceptions or assumptions underlay that moment? We read the trial of Anne Hutchinson in Massachusetts. We find in it various criticisms about her behavior in holding illegal church meetings. We hear that she gives birth to a monstrous deformity and is therefore a child of the devil. Do we from that assume either that Anne Hutchinson was in fact in league with the devil, or that this text should simply be thrown out? Or do we rather, in accord with the historical a priori imagination, say: we do not believe in the devil, we do not believe she was in league with the devil, but it does tell us something very important. They believed she was in contact with the devil. They interpreted that event in accord with those beliefs. Those beliefs are what animated their behavior, and they interpreted it as a sign of their rectitude, which may suggest that they may have had some doubts about their own rectitude — hence the need to find some sort of evidence to prove that they were really right in banishing Anne Hutchinson.

It is therefore the historical a priori imagination which allows us to criticize evidence and to use it not as authority, but as a source — a

source which needs to be interpreted and reconstructed in accord with our assumptions about how the past must have functioned.

History as Ideographic; the Historian as Detective

Another difference between the science of history and the natural sciences is, as I have mentioned, that the natural sciences are only concerned with the outsides of events, never the insides. But there is another important difference as well, one that separates Collingwood and the neo-idealists from people like Toynbee. The concern of the historian for Collingwood is always ideographic. It is a contrast to what are called nomothetic concerns. Science is concerned with laws — nomos. The function of science is to look at particular examples so that it can, culling from those examples and the regularities in them, produce general principles, general laws, and general formulas which explain the vast range of phenomena that have been analyzed.

History has the opposite concern, and that is called ideographic. It is concerned with the individual, with the unique. We do not examine the American Revolution to learn about the structure of revolutions. We examine the American Revolution because we want to know what happened in the American Revolution. It is a unique event. We do not examine the American Civil War to understand the nature of civil wars. We analyze and try to explain the American Civil War because we want to know the particularity of that event. Our concern is not with any laws. Our concern is not with any regularities. Our concern, as students of the past, is always with the particular, with the unique, with the individual event, structure, or action.

What history is concerned with, fundamentally, is therefore the recovery of the meaning or thought of some particular event, rather than the laws determining events of a similar or comparative nature.

This concern with motivation, with what lies behind an event, and the criticism of sources and evidence suggests that all of history is done

in accord with the a priori imagination, and that the previous models we have of how the historian functions are mistaken. To think of the historian as essentially a chronicler, as an assembler of sources, as an assembler of evidence, is in fact wrong. The best model for the work of the historian, Collingwood argues, is a detective. Consider how a detective does his work. He is presented with a series of accounts, some of which may conflict. What he is concerned to find is, first of all, what must this agent have been thinking? What position is this agent in? Is this person trying to cover up for himself or for someone else? Is there some reason to doubt the honesty of this account? Is this account plausible, given our a priori imagination of human motivation? It is precisely those considerations that work for a detective. When he comes to a crime scene where there has been a shooting, he is not necessarily interested in the trajectory of the bullet, unless that serves to establish the location of the criminal. He is much more concerned to ask: why? Why was there a shooting? What motives could someone have had to kill this person? And once I have determined the motives, I can look at the people who had that motivation. And once I have identified that motivation, I can then look at what they told me happened and judge it relative to that motivation and relative to what is plausible.

So the historian is really a detective who interrogates his sources. He looks at the papers of Madison, looks them over for insight into his political life, and draws inferences from them. He may draw inferences from the absence of papers. Madison burnt a big chunk of his papers before he died. No evidence — but need the historian be silent? No. He can use his a priori imagination. Why would Madison have burnt his papers? What is missing from his papers? What period does that cover? Does it cover the period when he went up to New York on a botany expedition — which he claimed it was — going up with Thomas Jefferson to meet Governor Clinton of New York and study some botanical plants? Or is it possible — given that he burnt

those papers dealing with the trip and the letters from that time, and that shortly thereafter Clinton, Madison, and Jefferson organized the first Jeffersonian party — that what was really going on was that they were organizing this first party, which was something considered illegitimate at the time, or at least less patriotic and ideal in its statesmanship than ought to have been? And knowing that full well, he burnt his papers so we would not know it. What piece of historical a priori imagination from our own time do we use to build that conjecture? We know that one of our presidents planned to have a big bonfire after he left office and was caught just before he had a chance to burn everything — that being President Nixon. We know he was going to burn material that was incriminating to him. We have a similar action in the past. We infer from that, just as a detective would. Given our experiences with politicians, Madison had some skeleton in his closet that he wished to hide.

This point is raised not because it is necessarily true, but as an example of how the historian works. It is not a simple act of copying from sources. It is a use of his own critical faculties in judging sources and trying to arrive at motivations, trying to get to the thought that might be behind some activity, some event.

There is something peculiar about this notion of the inside of events which must be pointed out right away. We are not necessarily concerned with the actual thought that the agent had at the moment he performed an action. We are interested in the thought that that action expressed. When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, at that moment, he might have been thinking about a goblet of wine and a nice steak dinner. That may have been his thought. Rather, we want to know what the meaning of that passage was. What thought did it express? It expressed the thought of a desire for political power and the solution to a time of troubles through the creation of a vast empire. So the inside of an event should never be read quite psychologically

as the exact thought that was in the agent's mind at that moment. The agent may, in fact, have been unaware to some extent of the significance of his action, but there is always some thought that can be recovered from it. He may come to understand his own action only after he has done it. Many such events can be thought of. When someone first fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, undoubtedly they did not think they were beginning the Civil War. They thought they were beginning Southern secession, which would very quickly be ratified, and then there would be two distinct nations. Later, that person might have realized that the thought expressed in his action was initiating this huge cataclysmic struggle.

As a result, we also know something else. History is exclusively concerned with fields of action that have an inside, and not all fields of action do. What we mean by that are fields of action or sorts of activities that are reflective — that require some cognition, some thought. This means that they are always purposive. They are always goal-centered. They are always done with some particular end in mind.

What are some examples of this? Politics is a purposive activity which expresses thoughts, desires, goals, and ambitions. So political history is a history which reveals an inside. The inside of Napoleon's activities was the desire for a united Europe, roughly speaking, under a large imperial hegemony based on a rule of civil law and civil equality.

Warfare is another example. Military history has an inside. Different strategies and different tactics are all purposeful. They are all planned. They all respond to circumstances in a reflective way. They may also express features of a culture or society. Americans were well reputed in the nineteenth century for the absolutely vicious way they fought wars, in the sense that they rarely distinguished between combatants and non-combatants. Women and children were not

safe, and people out of uniform were not safe. That is not simply, to use Conway's phrase, a contingency. It expresses a thought, a reflective reality about the way they thought of the world. America was the most democratic society in the world. In a democracy, everyone is equal. If you are at war with a nation, you are at war with everyone in the nation, whether they wear a uniform or not. There is no clear sense of hierarchy. For that reason, in the American Civil War, when Sherman felt the war had gone on a bit too long, he marched from Atlanta to the sea. There were no soldiers between Atlanta and the sea. He was not fighting any soldiers. He burnt everything. He ripped up every piece of rail line along the way and produced Sherman's neckties — they wrapped them around trees. He basically turned the South back to the Neolithic age: burnt everything, stole everything, and it was as if the entire stretch — fifty miles long, a couple of miles wide — had been nuked. And that expresses something. It expresses a change in strategy, a reflection about the way war must be fought successfully. It also expresses a conception of the nature of the society within which he was a member and the equality of all people — that the women and children on these plantations who are producing food are, in fact, soldiers. The food they produce supports their husbands and brothers in the field. And at the same time, when they send letters to their loved ones at the front saying the farm has just been burnt down and they are very hungry, one can expect that those soldiers will return home quite shortly.

Other fields include religion. Clearly it is a purposive activity — clearly exactly the sort of field in which we could have a history. There is an inside to religious events. Philosophy is a purposive rational activity. We can see the development of one school of philosophy from another, dealing with the paradigms, the problems, the issues that had been raised in previous moments. And finally, of course, art is another excellent example of purposive activity. As

such, it can yield a history of art. We can see the inside of art. We see in early Renaissance painting an expression of humanism. With the Baroque period, we see an expression of the dramatic context of light and dark, the sublime and the natural. With Impressionism, a realization that photography has made realism a no longer tenable goal for art, and that art must somehow transcend that and deal with the problem of perception. With Cubism, a realization of the perspectival nature of perception itself and an attempt to put a time dimension into painting. Then finally with Abstract Expressionism, a realization that art ultimately expresses more than it represents, and therefore we can give over form and the expression of anything in particular and simply express in an abstract manner through daubing paint on canvas.

Freedom and Progress in History

The next issue for Collingwood is the question of freedom and progress in history. For Collingwood, as for Hegel, human freedom can only be affirmed if we reject historical naturalism — if we reject the Enlightenment doctrines which argue that humans are just like any other animals. If we accept a materialistic analysis like Marx's, or to some extent like Weber's, it is impossible to affirm human freedom, because then we are simply following the laws of forces which dictate our activity. We are determined to act by external constraints. It is only by rejecting historical naturalism that we can affirm a belief in human freedom. It is in that way that we can state, if we reject historical naturalism, that history is solely the action of man and his choices. There is no external constraint.

This historical freedom is not to be confused with the freedom of the will. We cannot choose precisely whatever we want. It is rather much more in the order of Kantian autonomy. Our freedom comes in acting according to dictates or laws that we have made for ourselves. Our choices are in a sense determined, but not by external factors —

by the historical situations themselves. And that historical situation is itself the result of human conceptions and thought of the time.

So we can say, to some extent, Lincoln was forced to free the slaves. But he was not compelled by external constraints. He was forced by the situation — the incredible bloodbath that had occurred, the fact that he could no longer justify the costs of the war on the basis of preserving the Union. Moreover, he was losing the moral high ground to the South as it appealed for European intervention, and he realized that as long as slavery existed, a distinct civilization and cultural mode would exist in the South and constantly disunite the sections. His hand was thus forced, but not by any mechanical laws. It was forced by a situation which was itself the result of previous human choices and previous human beliefs — a belief on the part of Southerners that slavery was, at worst, a necessary evil and, at best, a positive good; a contrasting belief among Northerners that slavery was an anathema in the nineteenth-century growth of civilization, and that it damaged the dignity of labor in a capitalist world, both black and white. And I quote: "The freedom that there is in history consists in the fact that this compulsion, this determinism, is imposed upon the activity of human reason not by anything else, but by itself."

As for the question of progress, Collingwood and all twentieth-century neo-idealists hold that it makes absolutely no sense to think of historical progress as holding in periods as a whole. It is absolutely meaningless to talk about, in the sense Kant did, a growth of human progress in the human spirit and institutions that is uninterrupted — that the Enlightenment was a period of progress, or the Renaissance a period of progress, or the age of positivism a period of progress. The reason is quite simply that these are not things that are ever possible objects of historical knowledge. One cannot have a complete knowledge of an entire period, of everything that

happened in a particular range of time. He therefore rejects the idea of simply studying the spirit of an age, the spirit of a moment. We have to be far more specific than that. We have to look at particular fields.

We can talk about progress meaningfully within a particular field or problem. When progress exists, it will have these characteristics: it will constitute the solution of some problem or dilemma posed to a situation without loss of the values or the virtues of that situation. One should recognize in this essentially the Hegelian dialectic. There is a situation — the thesis. It produces its problems — its antithesis. The synthesis then solves the problems of the antithesis by preserving what was valuable and ultimately real in the thesis.

Here is a quote from Collingwood: "If thought in its first phase, after solving the initial problems of that phase, is then, through solving these, brought up against others which defeat it, and if the second solves these further problems without losing its hold on the solution of the first, so that there is gain without any corresponding loss, then there is progress."

That is a long-winded description. Let us try to flesh it out in a couple of examples. We could argue that there has been progress in the science of mechanics from Newton to Einstein. Newton constitutes a situation. He solved certain fundamental problems: an explanation of why planetary motion was, in fact, elliptical, and an explanation of why pendulums behaved in the way they did. After that, however, problems emerged — the problems posed by the Michelson-Morley experiment, problems about the nature of the ether that was claimed to exist in space, which did not in fact correspond to the experimental readings that had been taken. Progress comes with Einstein, who solved those problems with the notion of relativity and a sort of curved space. Yet at the same time, we preserve the virtues and value that had come from Newtonian mechanics. We can then

treat Newtonian mechanics as valid, as holding for large-scale physical phenomena on our planet. Newtonian mechanics still functions for most problems we face. When we need to deal with more esoteric problems — either astronomical, astrophysical, or subatomic — then we turn to Einstein. The same progress can then be seen between Einstein and the development of quantum physics.

Similarly, in other fields, one can think of cases of such progress. Take the idea of citizenship in the United States. We begin with the idea of the equality of all property holders. That constitutes a problem: there are people who have civic responsibilities to fight in our wars who are not property holders. We then extend that citizenship to them, and we have universal male suffrage. Then that constitutes a problem, because the rationality and property represented by such figures is often held by women as well, or by the freed blacks of the South. We extend citizenship to them and then to women as well. In all these progressive accounts, we preserve what was valuable in the original situation and yet solve the problems that had arisen within it as it was posited.

Progress in history is thus the sublation of the thought of the past at a later time, including the present. The same could be said for history itself. History is the process whereby what has come before posits problems which are then solved through future development, future thought. And yet, what was valuable in those first moments can be retained. Thus, in a way, nothing is lost in history. It is precisely for that reason that history can be recovered through reenactment, for there is still an element of Caesarism — of those impulses — in our own political life, such that we can empathetically understand where, as it were, Caesar was coming from, put ourselves in his shoes, and understand it. We can understand Martin Luther's stand against authority precisely because that civil disobedience still lives on — through the civil rights movement, perhaps, of the 1960s, or the civil

disobedience of some of the transcendentalists, perhaps Henry David Thoreau. And from that, we can recover the mentality, what must have been going on in Martin Luther's mind when he nailed his theses to the wall, when he refused to follow the path of authority.

The Influence of Collingwood on American Historiography

I want now to redeem a claim made previously about how influential Collingwood has been. In American historiography, before Collingwood's ideas became widely known, most historians had been what are called progressives. Progressive historians practice a sort of Marxism without any Marxist politics. They engaged in a class analysis of historical events, but excluded from it any political goal of socialism. An example is Charles Beard, who argued for an economic interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, as discussed in a previous lecture. He argued that if one looks at the people in the convention, they were all property owners — not only property owners, but people who owned bonds that had been issued during the war and which were not being redeemed because the Articles of Confederation did not have the power to tax. Therefore, they created a government that had the power to tax so that they could get paid back, and as a result build a commercial basis and a strong credit basis for the government. That was the predominant mode of historical interpretation up to the time of this neo-idealist revolution.

Its historical expression in the United States came from the great colonial historian and Puritanist Perry Miller, who went to the University of Chicago, where people like Herbert Schneider and Leo Strauss were soon to be, and who learned of this idealist theory of history and applied it to the American past. He began with a series of remarkable books called *The New England Mind*, in which he argued — and I quote — "I am going to write a history of a great folk movement without a single economic fact, without a single social characteristic, in the naive belief that what people believe and think

may actually have some impact on what they do." So rather than, like the progressives, treating the religious principles of the Puritan founders as just so much ideological cover for their Puritan oligarchy, he said they took those principles incredibly seriously. To understand what happened in seventeenth-century Massachusetts is to enter into the mindset of that culture.

Since that time, the idealist historiography has come to have a profound and very fecund impact on American history. Some of the works have been brilliant. Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood, two of the greatest American historians, have shown us the details of what might be called the revolutionary mind, the American mind. They are studies not merely of ideas.

One way of thinking about the progress of idealist history is to see how, as they became more embarrassed about being called idealists, they changed the name of what they were studying. But it is still the same thing. They start out saying they are going to study the American character. Then, with Perry Miller, it becomes the American mind, or the revolutionary mind. Later, when that sounds too colloquial, they say they are not going to study the American mind — they are going to study American ideas. And then when that starts to sound too simple, they say they are going to study the revolutionary ideology. Whenever one sees a history book with a title referring to the ideology of this or that, it is a legacy of Collingwood.

The legacy is that when people say things, it is not just a way of trying to get some work done. They take it seriously and they mean it. It is those beliefs which explain their activity, not merely rationalize it. It is not an instrument that they use to try to get to some end. It is actually what motivates their actions. And their actions are not what is significant. It is the thought behind them. That is what changes over time. Those actions teach them that thought is adequate to

their goals, to their desires. And that is how history moves. That is how history changes.

This legacy has had a profound effect on the writing of history and the thinking about history. When we ask for the meaning of history, more often than not we are asking for an idealist account. We are asking for what was the thought, what was the cognitive content enmeshed in some behavior, in some event, in some action. When we ask what was the meaning of the Revolution, one of the answers we might have is: a fight for republican principles, a belief in no taxation without representation, and a struggle against monarchic forms of government. That is the great legacy that neo-idealism represents, its rich mode of historiography, and part of its perennial appeal.

Lecture 11: The Positivist Conception of Historical Knowledge — Carl Hempel's "The Function of General Laws in History"

Carl Hempel was a member of a philosophical movement, or school of thought, that was very prevalent in the Anglo-American world in the first half of the twentieth century, known as either logical positivism or logical empiricism.

Some of its more famous members were figures associated with the so-called Vienna Circle: Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, the young Ludwig Wittgenstein, A.J. Ayer, and, of course, Rudolf Carnap.

What characterized logical positivism, or logical empiricism, was, on the one hand, the traditional positivist belief that science was the principal form of positive knowledge, and that all disciplines which had a claim to knowledge but were not scientific were in fact illusory at best — that the only sort of knowledge one could really depend on was scientific knowledge. As such, science was the model for all empirical knowledge. What made it logical was that the logical positivists were strongly moved by fundamental breakthroughs in logical research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One of the reasons they saw science as the model of all empirical knowledge was that they recognized that logic was probably the model for all mathematical knowledge, and that such knowledge was not in fact empirical, but analytic.

Now, of course, that is a very broad, blustery philosophical claim — that science is the sum and substance of all of our knowledge of the world. Obviously, there are two domains which challenge that. The first is the domain of common sense. How do we account for everyday knowledge, which does not seem to be scientific? The

logical positivists responded by treating that as a kind of primitive science, or rather by saying that science is in a way common sense made a bit more reflective. They argue that, fundamentally, when our everyday knowledge — our common sense knowledge — is adequate, it is because it very roughly mirrors the scientific method and scientific analysis, and that both are culled from experience through the use of trial and error, which, when refined, becomes the experimental method.

The other challenge to the claim that science is the sum and substance of all knowledge is history, which does not seem to be an advanced science. It does not seem to produce general laws. There are two strategies for dealing with that challenge. One is to continue to affirm one's principle, acknowledge that history does not produce general laws, and simply say that it is not knowledge — that it is anecdotal, a second-class form of knowledge, something rather like the work of gossip columnists. The other approach is to say that history does, in fact, give us knowledge, and not to violate the intuition we have that what historians say is capable of being either true or false, while claiming that history is, in fact, a kind of primitive science — perhaps a little more advanced than common sense, but not yet up to the level of the advanced natural sciences like physics or chemistry.

What underlay the entire positivist project was a commitment to what Hempel calls the methodological unity of the empirical sciences — that all of the sciences fundamentally applied the same method. There was one and only one scientific form of explanation. All other forms of explanation, as we shall see, he terms pseudo-explanations: things claiming to be explanatory, but which in fact fail to offer valid inferences and valid explanations or deductions.

In the essay we are going to examine, called "The Function of General Laws in History," written in 1942 and published in the *Journal*

of Philosophy, Hempel attempts to take on the challenge posed by history and to explain why history is in fact a science, thereby validating the claim of the methodological unity of science. His strategy, as mentioned, is this: he cannot deny that history is knowledge, he does not want to deny that it is a science, and he wants to argue that it does, in fact, contribute to human knowledge. It may not be as rigorous as physics. It probably qualifies as what we would call a soft science, but a science nonetheless. It has a valid explanatory scheme; it is simply not as rigorous as that of the more advanced sciences.

The Covering Law Model

He begins with one fundamental premise and argument: there is one and only one form of explanation that we know. All valid explanations require the use of general laws. A general law is a universal conditional proposition. It says something to the effect that if x, then y — or that all x's produce y's — something absolutely without exception, and which always takes the form of a condition: if we get this first condition, we will get that result afterwards. What general laws do is connect cause and event through that conditional nexus. Given some conjunction of conditions which stand as cause, we can expect with regularity to produce the effect as the result. The function of such general laws is to supply predictions in science and explanations.

What is required to make such an explanation or prediction is the deduction of the event to be explained from a series of laws and initial conditions. These initial conditions, for the historian, will always be preceding and causal conditions. Here are the conditions that Hempel lays down. The assertion that a set of events — say, of the kinds C1, C2, through CN — have caused the event to be explained amounts to the statement that, according to certain general laws, a set of events of the kinds mentioned is regularly accompanied by an

event of kind E. Thus, the scientific explanation of the event in question consists of: (1) a set of statements asserting the occurrence of certain events, C1 through Cn, at certain times and places; (2) a set of universal hypotheses, such that (a) the statements of both groups are reasonably well confirmed by empirical evidence, and (b) from the two groups of statements the sentence asserting the occurrence of event E can be logically deduced.

So let us say we want to explain the occurrence of a revolution. We detail what we consider the relevant initial conditions: a shortage of bread, a breakdown of political legitimacy, followed by a defection among certain political elites, and a crisis within the military. Those will be the initial conditions. We then apply some general law we might have — such that when the economy reaches a certain point of crisis, when legitimacy has been denied to the current regime, and when a certain degree of desperation and aspiration is held by elements in the society that have the possibility of political action, revolutions occur. We see if those initial conditions can be applied to that law to produce the prediction that a revolution occurs. We apply the correct dates. And in that way, we explain perhaps the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution.

That, then, is Hempel's model of how explanations in fact work. That model could be used just as easily — indeed, far more easily — in characterizing explanations in physics or in other scientific disciplines. It always takes that form. The gas is at temperature X at moment X. The pressure is increased. We should expect to see its temperature rise. We deduce that it should rise given the laws we have about how those things relate to each other. And if it does, in fact, rise, we have effectively explained the event.

Now, all physical explanations — those that are not historical — do have one additional feature worth mentioning briefly, and that is boundary conditions. The theory will hold in these states. In optics,

for example, we believe in the principle of the rectilinear propagation of light: light moves in straight lines. But we put boundary conditions on that. It does not move in a straight line through certain media. It does not move in a straight line through water. It does not move in a straight line through convex or concave lenses, in which case the light is diffracted. Those would be the boundary conditions within which the theory holds. One could argue that the same thing would hold for history. One could come up with a theory of revolutions that explains the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. There is, in fact, an historian, Crane Brinton, who has done just that. He has come up with a general law of what causes all revolutions. And yet, when one comes across cases where a revolution might be expected given the initial conditions, he might be able to specify certain boundary conditions to explain why it did not occur. Why was there no revolution among slaves in the nineteenth-century South? It turns out one must make up at least a certain percentage of the population to have any hope of success. Slaves were always a minority of the population. Therefore, although the conditions may otherwise be right for revolution, they do not fall within the boundary condition, and there will be no revolution. Or some other community may not have the proper information necessary to organize in a revolutionary fashion.

Something else worth noting about such explanations is that they generally examine not an event in its entirety, but a particular property of an event. Going back to the case of studying gases, the explanation will attempt to explain the rise in temperature of a gas by increasing its pressure. It does not try to explain, say, what the gas smelled like or what color it is. There may be different explanations for those things, but an explanation is always relative to a particular property, a particular feature. This means that the event must always be characterized under a specific description.

This is an important point, because every event — and this is something that logical positivists and analytic philosophers have had to reckon with — can be described from an infinite number of angles and perspectives. Consider an example. One could describe in physiological terms the following situation: two men are sitting about five feet apart with a table between them and pieces of plastic on the table. One picks up a piece of plastic and moves it three inches forward. Another picks up another piece of plastic and moves it three inches toward the other. One could also describe that as two people playing chess: one plays pawn to king four, the other plays pawn to king four. One could also describe that same event in psychological terms: one person is trying to unsettle the other by playing an opening that is completely unsound, knowing full well that the other knows it is unsound and is simply playing mind games. There is a wide variety of ways to describe any event. All of our explanations will always be relative to a particular description.

This is important because it means there is no such thing as a complete description of an event. All descriptions are relative to some particular set of properties with which we want to engage our explanatory energies. Thus, there is no such thing as a total explanation. When the historian turns and says that science may work just fine for understanding the way billiard balls move, but that human beings are more complex and there is simply too much to the human situation compared to the movement of billiard balls on a pool table, the positivist responds that this criticism applies just as well to billiard balls as it does to human beings. There is an infinite number of ways of describing what is going on when one billiard ball strikes another and moves it. Our explanations are always relative to a particular description. We happen generally to be interested in the forces and the momentum that one billiard ball transfers to another. But there are many different ways to describe it. And the same applies to history.

We can have scientific explanations in history, but they must be relative to particular characteristics of an event, never relative to an event as a whole. On this, Hempel is quite insistent. There is no difference in this respect between history and the natural sciences. Both can give an account of their subject matter only in terms of general concepts, and history can, in his words, "grasp the unique individuality of its objects of study no more and no less than can physics or chemistry." In every case, we are looking at particular features or properties with which we want to engage in an explanatory way.

This means that the claim that history must, because each historical event is fundamentally unique, be ideographic — concerned with the individual — reflects a fundamental confusion about the way the other sciences work. Every physical event is also absolutely unique. No two experiments are identical: at the very least, their spatial-temporal coordinates have changed. There is no reason to claim a greater individuality for human behaviors than for the behaviors of various subatomic particles on the one hand, or other mammals and species on the other. Such a claim strikes Hempel and most positivists as a kind of superstition, a metaphysical hobby horse of metahistorians.

Explanations and Pseudo-Explanations

This brings us to the distinction between explanations and what positivists like to call pseudo-explanations. "Pseudo" is a very popular word among positivists. It is very much a young man's philosophy, full of bluff and bluster. When it comes across people who disagree with it and argue for other principles, they are told that those are pseudo-concepts, pseudo-explanations, pseudo-theories, and pseudo-arguments.

Valid explanations, according to Hempel, occur only when there are general laws. These general laws connect cause and effect in a deductive structure. This structure is today called the deductive-nomological method. The point is that this is the only form of explanation we know — or at least the only valid form. It is the use of such laws that distinguishes a real explanation, one that truly satisfies, from a pseudo-explanation.

What form do pseudo-explanations take? They may invoke principles like entelechy or teleology to explain the growth of organic entities, and things like fate and destiny in history. An example of a pseudo-explanation for Hempel would be Aristotle's old belief that acorns become oak trees because that is their entelechy — the natural form toward which they develop. The correct explanation is that they develop into oak trees because they have some sort of genetic coding which, given the proper nutrition, plays out its program and grows. Similarly, in history, the notion that Caesar crossed the Rubicon because it was his fate, or because history led him in that direction, is, for Hempel, a pseudo-explanation. That is directly analogous to saying that the acorn becomes the oak tree because that is its entelechy — that toward which it naturally moves and naturally ends. If there is not a general law, what one gets in such an explanation is purely metaphorical, or an appeal to the emotions through vague analogies.

"The North won the Civil War because the United States was reaching its maturity and growing in its stature." The United States is not a person. It does not mature. It was never fed with milk, did not move through baby food, and did not eventually learn to walk. It is a nation, a system of institutions. To apply such an analogy appeals to our emotions as Americans — we feel pride in the infant nation and the growing nation. But it offers no explanatory purchase. It cannot be verified. It cannot be falsified. It is something we accept only

because it appeals to our prejudices or our desires. Whenever we hear the words fate, destiny, or mission in history, we know we are being appealed to emotionally by historical advertising men and being subjected to pseudo-explanation.

A truly scientific explanation is always capable of some form of objective test. It never requires an empathetic understanding — getting inside the head of the analyst, historian, or subject and feeling some sort of fellow feeling. It can always be tested in a straightforward empirical way. There are three things by which every scientific explanation can be tested.

First, those initial conditions — the initial state of affairs from which change will occur — must always be capable of empirical verification. To say that the price of bread was skyrocketing before the revolution and that there was growing desperation on the part of the people, that must be something one can empirically verify, either by finding evidence of the price of bread or by reading in the common people's journals and newspaper accounts about their growing desperation. An example of initial conditions that will not satisfy this requirement: "The American spirit was preparing to emerge from its religious phase into the height of the Enlightenment come the Revolution." How would one ever test that? Does the American spirit leave some sort of diary somewhere?

Second, there must be some sort of empirical test of the universal hypothesis. If one claims that whenever a larger military force faces a smaller military force it wins, one must be able to test that in examples. The fact that one can come across a counterexample and falsify that hypothesis may show that it was a wrong hypothesis, but at least it was a valid one. Invalid hypotheses are ones that one cannot even imagine how to test. "The stronger army always wins" — how do we know it is stronger? Because it won. That is an absolutely useless and unverifiable law.

Third, one must be able to check that the inferences drawn are all valid and coherent. If told that one's explanatory principle contains a contradiction — say, that the United States fought the Civil War for the sake of freedom, and yet imposed a system of debt peonage on blacks in the South within twenty years, which would seem to be a contradiction — and some analyst responds by saying that this is merely the contradiction of the dialectic, the inherent tension of the dialectic which always works through contradictions, we know that is, again, a pseudo-explanation. It is a completely incoherent explanation. When an explanation makes sense, it is logically valid; when it does not, one simply says it is dialectical tension, that things are so complex — the rich texture of historical reality. Whenever one hears people talk about the rich texture of things and the complicated nature of things, according to Hempel, one knows that someone is trying to pull a fast one, explanatorily speaking. The world may be complex. Explanations must be simple, and inferences must be valid. We cannot say, when we come across a contradiction in our explanation, that we are merely mirroring the complexity of the world. That will not do. Inferences are either valid or they are not valid.

Those three checks — a check on the empirical initial conditions, an empirical check on the universal hypotheses, and a check that the inferences and principles of argument are in fact valid — should obtain in any truly valid explanatory scheme.

Explanation, Prediction, and the Temporal Objection

One of the arguments made against this model of historical explanation — against this epistemological view of history — is that science is predictive. Given initial conditions, we predict future states, verify them by running experiments, and see if our predictions are borne out. But obviously, as Conway pointed out quite trenchantly, there are no experiments in history. Vico points this out as well.

There is no prediction in history. We do not prophesy about the future. We are only talking about the past. This is, of course, a problem that Hempel must engage.

His solution is to argue that the distinction between prediction and explanation is not a function of logical form. In other words, the logical form of an explanation of a past event is in fact identical to the logical form of a prediction of a future event. The difference is only in the temporal position of the analyst. When we explain events, they are events which have occurred in the past. When we predict them, they have yet to occur. Predictions are simply explanations of events that have not yet occurred. Hempel then points out that many of the explanations in the physical sciences which are considered scientific are not predictions — they are explanations of past events. When the theory of nuclear winter was first being computer-modeled and people used it to try to explain the disappearance of the dinosaurs — that a large celestial body struck the earth and produced a huge dust cloud which destroyed enough vegetation so that the dinosaurs could not survive, and that the only things able to survive were small rodent-like animals that eventually evolved into humanity — that is a scientific explanation of an event that, if it occurred at all, occurred some sixty-five million years ago. Similarly, think of astronomy. Most of what astrophysicists attempt to explain has already occurred. They are rarely engaging in predictions about the future. Even when they do engage in predictions about the future — about when we should expect to observe some particular star go supernova, for example — they are not really making predictions about future events. They are making predictions about what we will see in the future, but those stars, if the predictions are correct, went supernova long ago.

So much of science — most of it, in fact — involves predictions that actually refer to the past, not to the future. And yet no one would say

that astronomy is not a science because it does not predict things in the future. If astronomy counts as a science on those terms, why not history? Hempel's argument here is quite strong. The claim that history cannot offer any nomothetic or scientific explanation because its events are all in the past is entirely irrelevant, and reflects a scientific illiteracy on the part of historians who assume that scientists are doing one thing when they are, in fact, doing another.

Explanation Sketches and Incomplete Explanations

I want now to turn to the question of what Hempel calls incomplete explanations. This will turn out to be the category that actually characterizes why history is a science, but a soft one. Many common sense explanations that we have in everyday life are incomplete in this way: what they usually offer us are the initial conditions, the event, and a tacit assumption that there is some sort of law which connects those things. The tacit assumption of that law shows up in shorthand words — words which mark the place where we would put the law if we knew it. We use words like "because" or "therefore." Your barn burns down, and you ask your son Johnny why the barn burned down. He says the barn burned because a match was dropped in the hay. The word "because" stands in for some general law which he does not know. He does not know the laws of chemistry. If he did, he would specify them: he would give the lit match as the initial condition, cite some laws describing the way a lit match engages in combustion with dried material, which then spreads as temperatures increase and destroy whatever wood structures are being consumed. Undoubtedly, we could produce the scientific laws for that. Johnny does not know them, but he has good reason to assume there are such laws. So he simply says "because." He gives the initial conditions, gives the event, and the word "because" sums up where the law should fit. Since that is adequate for everyday experience, we accept it. That is not to say it is not a

scientific explanation — it is, but it is incomplete. It is missing something. Nonetheless, it passes muster for our practical needs.

An example in history: the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor; therefore, the United States declared war on them. The word "therefore" sums up some sort of law — such that if we redescribe the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor as an act of aggression against a powerful nation in its own territory and military facilities, we could probably formulate an appropriate law. Whenever a powerful nation is attacked by an aggressor on its own territory, in its military facilities, it is placed in a situation in which it must respond. One of the natural responses, under certain circumstances, is a declaration of war. The Japanese fulfill those initial conditions, the Americans fulfill the initial conditions, and we get the result: the declaration of war. Rarely will one find such laws laid out in a history book. What one finds is an incomplete explanation — but not a pseudo-explanation, because there is good reason to believe that such laws exist. The use of the word "therefore" in that case does not preclude the possibility that this was in fact a scientific explanation.

Now, there are cases in which the incompleteness — the failure to produce the law — is in fact essential, and that is because we simply cannot supply the appropriate laws and descriptions. The major reason that would be the case is that, for some matters, we can formulate not a law but only a probabilistic hypothesis. There does not seem to be a clear law about the spread of disease; rather, it seems to follow probability functions. The same applies to the onset of recessions. There is no mathematical certainty about it; there are simply probabilities. But even these are valid explanatory laws. So there are two forms of valid, though incomplete, descriptions: inessentially incomplete ones, where we do not bother to put in the laws because we really do not care about them but assume they are there, otherwise we would not have an explanation; and those in

which we cannot put in the laws because the laws would not in fact be strictly law-like but probabilistic — though if a scholar were so interested, he could in fact come up with those probability functions.

What, then, would we call the sort of explanation historians offer when they give initial conditions, the causal conditions, and the event to be explained, and roughly indicate what those laws should be? Hempel calls that an explanation sketch. It is not exactly an explanation, but it is close enough to pass muster. The bulk of historians who do not offer laws do not offer full explanations, but they do offer these explanation sketches, which are adequate to the task. That is not to say that no historians ever include full explanations or even statements of laws.

Hempel quotes from Donald W. McConnell's *Economic Behavior*: "As the activities of the government are enlarged, more people develop a vested interest in the continuation and expansion of government functions." And one does find in some history texts the statement of laws. Here is an example of such a passage:

People who have jobs do not like to lose them. Those who are habituated to certain skills do not welcome change. Those who have become accustomed to the exercise of a certain kind of power do not like to relinquish their control — if anything, they want to develop greater power and correspondingly greater prestige. Thus, government offices and bureaus, once created, in turn institute drives not only to fortify themselves against assault, but to enlarge the scope of their operations.

This is a complete explanation. It starts with certain hypothetical initial conditions and produces laws to deduce the state of affairs that needed to be deduced. The point is not that this is necessarily the correct explanation. The point is, first, that it is not the case that no historians offer laws — some do. One might argue that Marxism

supplies some such laws, that Weber's sociological analysis offers some as well, and even that Toynbee's model of history offers some.

Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the vast bulk of historians do not, in fact, offer the laws. They offer only the sketches — and the reason Hempel calls them sketches is that they vaguely gesture at what the laws might be, laws which can be sketched in at a later point by future research, should some scholar so desire. Although the laws are not necessarily present, a sketch is capable of an empirical test. For that reason, an explanation sketch is not a pseudo-explanation. At the same time, it is fair to say that it is not equally testable as a full-blown explanation. It passes muster in the same way common sense explanations pass muster about the barn burning because a match was dropped in it. We can test it: was the hay wet? If the hay was wet, it is not likely that the match actually caused the fire; it may have been the result of arson. But again, it is not as testable as it would have been given all the physical laws we need.

Why Historians Omit Laws, and the Question of Specifically Historical Laws

Despite the lack of stated laws within history texts, history is, in fact, nomothetic — law-like in its explanatory structure. Like any other form of explanation, it tries to show that the occurrence being explained was not a matter of chance, that it was not random. If it were random, it would make very little sense to describe or analyze it in any way. All histories presuppose that the events to be explained were the result of certain prior or present conditions. The Civil War must have had something to do with the election of Abraham Lincoln, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the breakdown of political order and party structure in the 1850s. If not, why do those things show up in books about the causes of the Civil War? Why not start a book on the Civil War, if those things are not the causes, with a discussion of Renaissance painting, followed by the Brooklyn Dodgers moving to Los Angeles? If events are not caused by

previous conditions, why include anything in the book? Or better yet, why not simply say the Civil War started at this date and ended at this date, and leave it at that? Obviously, historians assume that these events are not random — that something causes them, that certain prior events or present conditions are at work.

Nonetheless, most historians do not think they are engaging in nomothetic, law-like explanation. And in fact, most historians do leave out the laws they presume or presuppose. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, most of the laws historians draw on are very much like the laws used in the barn-burning example. They are common sense laws — laws from human psychology or everyday sociology, a very common, shared, and well-worn body of knowledge. When people are hungry, they get desperate. When people are pushed, they fight back. These are not particularly sophisticated theses, and historians have PhDs and want to be sophisticated like everyone else. It is somewhat embarrassing to state laws like that. Because these laws are so common and trite, historians do not feel they are worth stating — and because they do not state them, they do not think that history is, in fact, law-like.

Sometimes, however, it is not because the laws are trite but because they are incredibly complex. Consider the range of initial conditions necessary to produce a revolution as opposed to a mere riot. There are so many contingencies distinguishing a rebellion, a riot, and a brief insurrectionary flare-up from a revolution that it might take years and years of research to specify those laws. The historian may not really be interested in that. He may be far more interested in the particular revolution to be explained. So he leaves it to some other scholar to figure out what the laws are; he will gesture roughly at what they might be and attend to the particulars.

Consider an example. Could one state, without considerable research, the laws which led Dust Bowl farmers from Oklahoma to

migrate to California? That would take quite a bit of thought and quite a bit of research, probably more than the event itself merits. Yet at the same time, one must believe that there was some causal mechanism. Or was it a coincidence that all these people from Oklahoma moved to California at roughly the same time, apparently after the Dust Bowl? We tend to assume that there must be some sort of law-like connection between the devastation of a particular agricultural region and the movement of those agricultural workers to a more hospitable climate. But we might not be able to formulate the law because it is simply too complex for the historian. As a result, he leaves the law out and assumes it to be implicit. Yet, as the historian tacitly assumes without ever admitting it to himself, he does assume there is such a law because he assumes there is a causal relation — and so there must be some mechanism connecting the Dust Bowl to the emigration of the so-called Okies to California.

Part of the reason historians do not think they are engaging in a nomothetic discipline is that they are wary of what Hempel calls specifically historical laws. Historians think that if history is to be nomothetic, to be a science, there must be unique laws of history which are distinct from the laws of any other discipline. And they simply do not have any. Perhaps one might argue that Marxism supplies some of these, perhaps Weber, perhaps Toynbee. But consider: Marx's laws would be subsumed under the discipline of philosophy or economics; Weber's under that of sociology, not necessarily history; and Toynbee's perhaps might be considered a bit too social-psychological.

In fact, most of the laws used by any and every historian come from other disciplines: biology, economics, physics, chemistry. When we describe why one assaulting army was able to breach the walls of another, the laws we are presupposing in describing that military action are, in fact, the laws of chemistry and physics — laws of forces,

of cannonballs, and laws of combustion and the changing of physical states through the use of various explosive and incendiary devices. Similarly, when we describe the panic of a particular economic period — say, the financial crisis of the Era of Good Feelings — we are drawing on, and assuming the existence of, laws from economics. But the fact that these laws are not formulated by historians themselves does not mean that historical explanations are not law-like. One might think of historians as people who draw together laws from all the disciplines and use them to explain the human past.

In fact, the use of any evidence at all by the historian presupposes general laws. Consider taking a look at the journal of Thomas Shepard, a minister in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Since it is a book published in the twentieth century, there must be general laws connecting it to its original. One must believe that somehow this book is a copy of the original text — which would presuppose a general law that when publishers claim to be reproducing an original copy, they are in fact doing so, because there are legal mechanisms which will punish them if they do not. One must also assume that when a text is signed by an author — in the original — it is in fact the result of that author's own writing and his own beliefs. To use any evidence at all thus requires a belief in general laws. To look at the original copy of the Declaration of Independence with the signatures at the bottom, and to claim that it is a source telling us something about the way our nation was formed, assumes general laws — that this same document has persisted over time, and that without reason to believe it has been burned and replaced with a sham copy with altered words, one employs a general law: that without contrary evidence, there is good reason to believe it is the same copy.

Hempel's Response to Collingwood: Empathy and Theoretical Understanding

I want now to mention Hempel's response to a couple of the claims by Collingwood in particular. First, the claim to an empathetic

understanding — getting inside the figure of the agent, understanding how it must have felt to be that historical person in that position. Neo-idealists who do this are confusing a heuristic technique of their own understanding with an explanatory device. In fact, when the historian places himself in the situation of the agent, consider what he is really doing: he is trying to identify the causal forces that were impinging on that individual. And that is a nomothetic discipline. By asking what must have been going through Caesar's mind, one is asking what general causal forces were impinging on Caesar's situation — and what general laws he had to account for. This requires no particular affinity for the person in question. It can, in fact, be done with figures for whom one feels the most absolute distaste. Absolutely objective scholars like William Shirer and Alan Bullock can understand the motivations of Adolf Hitler. They despise Hitler. They share nothing of his mentality. But they can say: given a man who had these sorts of proclivities and these sorts of events occurring around him, what was likely to be his motivation in coming up with responses?

Finally, I want to mention two other forms of historical understanding: theoretical understanding. These come in two varieties. There are some explanations which are nomothetic. Marxism is a nomothetic explanatory scheme. It may be wrong, but it is law-like. It can be disproved if it is wrong, and that is one of its virtues — it may be scientific and just wrong science. Similarly, social Darwinism and any law-like posit of Weberian sociology constitute one sort of theory of history. The other sort is something which subsumes events under some general idea: the growth of the world spirit over time, the rise of progress across history. It is the latter which are pseudo-explanations. It is the latter which cannot be tested empirically. And it is the latter which fall outside the domain of legitimate historical understanding and explanation.

Lecture 12: Analytic Musings — Arthur Danto's *Narration and Knowledge*

The analytic philosophy of history, and analytic philosophy in general, is best conceived of as the Anglo-American heir to the logical positivist movement. The first analytic philosophers were trained by the positivists and certainly learned the techniques of logical analysis, yet broke away from positivism for several reasons. Logical positivism became untenable principally as a result of two people's work. The first was Thomas Kuhn and his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which suggested that science worked not through the slow but steady accretion of knowledge, but through what he called revolutionary paradigm shifts. The second was the important research of Willard Quine — who had studied with Rudolf Carnap — and who showed that the fundamental assumption underlying positivism, the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic, between the purely formal and the empirical, was in fact untenable.

What characterizes analytic philosophy is that it shares with positivism a concern with epistemological issues: questions of form, questions of structure, questions of gauging the truth, knowledge, and objectivity claims of various disciplines, fields, and forms of inquiry. It also shares with positivism the sophisticated techniques of analysis developed early in the twentieth century — the use of logical notation, artificial languages, rigorous proof procedures, the practice of taking arguments and schematizing them, putting variables in the place of propositions and terms, and stressing the formal coherence of the argument.

Where analytic philosophy differs from positivism is in that it does not share positivism's sharp and invidious distinction between

scientific and pseudo-scientific disciplines. That is because it does not share positivism's scientism — by which we mean an almost cultic worship of science as a sort of absolute truth serving as the secular equivalent of religion. Certainly, part of what was inspiring and attractive about positivism was that it offered an overarching vision of the world in which science stood for human rationality, just as religion had previously stood for human rectitude. That sort of distinction no longer makes sense in analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy therefore rejects the hard and fast line between science as valid knowledge and everything else as pseudo-knowledge. With it, analytic philosophy also rejects the belief in the methodological unity of all empirical knowledge — the idea that all knowledge of the world must come in exactly the same form, and that there is exactly one structure for explaining or understanding things in the world. That was a fundamental presupposition of the positivists, one that analytic philosophers do not share.

It should also be noted that analytic philosophy is still, for the most part, the dominant school of philosophy in America, England, parts of Germany, and Scandinavia. In general terms, then, we could say that analytic philosophy rejects the major doctrines of positivism while continuing to use its formal techniques.

There was certainly no small amount of analytic philosophy of history written after Hempel's piece, up to about the mid-1960s. Then the work largely stopped. After that, very few large-scale analytic philosophies of history were produced, because one canonical text had been produced which had, as far as analytic philosophy was concerned, solved all of the extant problems. That text was *The Analytical Philosophy of History* by Arthur C. Danto. Some years later, he added further chapters and produced a somewhat more well-rounded text called *Narration and Knowledge*. This has stood as the

state of the art of the analytic philosophy of history, and it is the text with which we will now engage.

The Narrative Form of Historical Accounts

Like an analytic philosopher, Danto is interested in the form of historical accounts — the actual structure of historical explanation and discourse. He argues that historical accounts are always, or almost always, in fact stories. Historians tell stories, and the form of these stories is always a narrative account about the past. Danto wants to argue that this is not an incidental feature, not something merely contingent. It is philosophically significant and worthy of a logical analysis — an analysis of what we might call the logic of narrative sentences. How do they work? What is their structure?

Such narratives — the large-scale texts that make up a history — can be organized around three different sorts of issues, according to Danto. The first are pragmatic issues. By pragmatic issues we mean moralistic concerns, such as a history of slavery in the Americas or a history of racism in the Americas. Other sorts of pragmatic issues might be directly political: someone interested in arguing for term limits might do a history of the notion and practice of term limits from Madison up to the present. And of course another sort of pragmatic consideration is ideological. One can organize a historical narrative around, say, Marxist or liberal themes, showing the growth of human progress through social reform, or around conservative themes, showing the value and importance of preserving institutions as wide-eyed reformers destroy what is valuable around them, or around any other ideological framework.

The second organizing principle is theoretical. Here we might think of a different kind of Marxism — a Marxist history organized around the story of the development of the productive forces, arguing that the French Revolution is fundamentally the expression of a growing

market capitalism, with a corresponding breakdown of the social relations of the Ancien Régime and feudalism. We can think of a history organized around Freudian theory; several have been written. One might discuss the significance of Martin Luther relative to his upbringing, or examine the Salem witch trials and observe that the majority of accusers were young women on the threshold of marriageable age, accusing women roughly of their mothers' age, and therefore projecting their anxieties about their mothers onto other women. One might add to this the observation that most of these young women had been weaned at an incredibly early age, so that this poor weaning practice, combined with anxieties about their future marital status, led them to project fantasies of aggression against their mothers onto other women. These are not invented examples — they are all drawn from actual historical texts.

The third organizing principle is consequential: organizing the narrative around outcomes. We might organize the story of the Civil War with an eye to what resulted from it — the creation of a stronger federal union, the resolution of the question of states' rights versus national rights, the consolidation of a single national identity.

Narrative Sentences

So much for what the narrative as a whole can be organized around. Each individual narrative sentence, however, might be characterized as a sentence which refers to two events but is only really about the first. In other words, it is a sentence in which we take two events and use the second event to describe the first. What might be an example? "Germany's invasion of Poland was the beginning of the end of the Third Reich." The later event — the fall of the Third Reich — is used to describe the first event, the invasion of Poland. "The firing on Fort Sumter signaled the beginning of the bloody war between the states." The war between the states had not yet begun; it is a later event, but it is used to describe a previous event and

place it in some context of significance. Again: "Germany's invasion of Poland was the first example of blitzkrieg in the Second World War" — something which had not yet begun, since the invasion preceded the Allied declarations of war. Yet nonetheless, this sentence characterizes the first event, a brief invasion, in terms of something later.

What narrative sentences enable the historian to do, then, is to speak of temporally extended events — events that occur over quite some duration, events like the Second World War, which lasts for years. It is not an event like hitting a baseball or casting a vote, which are extremely discrete. The Second World War is an extended event. And only narrative sentences — sentences that use tense and refer to one event in terms of another — allow us to speak of these larger, more extended events. It is for that reason that they allow us to employ what Danto calls project verbs.

Project Verbs and Temporal Structures

A certain range of our verbs, predicates, and descriptions of actions refer to events which are not discrete at all. Walking is a discrete event. Sipping water is a discrete event. Lecturing is a discrete event: it occurs within a specific stretch of space-time, and that is all that occurs within that stretch. But there are other events, like fighting the Second World War, which are not continuous but are extended and discontinuous. Consider a soldier who is fighting the Second World War. Is he fighting at every moment? Even when he is sleeping? Even when he is on leave? If we think about the total number of minutes describing his service within the armed forces, even at the front, the number of minutes of actual combat is an absolutely minuscule fraction of the whole. Nonetheless, we may speak of him throughout that entire time as fighting the Second World War, because it is a temporally extended event — one that does not occur at any particular moment.

Consider more intuitive everyday examples. A continuous and discrete event would be walking the dog. Once the leash is on, you take the dog outside and walk it; as soon as you return, you are no longer walking the dog. That is a discrete event. Now consider a discontinuous event: planting roses. One does not do it all at once. First one must turn over the soil, prepare it, fertilize it, dig some holes, plant the seeds, water them, cultivate them, and eventually harvest them. That planting takes place over possibly several weeks or several months. It is not a continuous event; there are large gaps within it. These latter sorts of projects — what Danto calls temporal structures — are time-extended events, structures that occur over extended stretches of time in a discontinuous series. It is within these temporal structures — planting cotton, planting roses, fighting the Second World War, building a nation — that narrative sentences relate events.

So let us return to our example of the firing of the first shot of the Civil War at Fort Sumter. We are taking that event and relating it to a discontinuous temporal structure called the Civil War, in which battles are not fought at every single moment, shots are not fired at every single moment, and no unit is engaged in posting and maneuvering at every single moment. But nonetheless it is an event which occurs over an extended period. The significance of a given event is shown by placing it within the context of this larger temporal structure. What was the significance of the firing on Fort Sumter? It initiated the Civil War. What was the significance of the shots fired at Lexington and Concord? They initiated the Revolutionary War. What was the significance of Rosa Parks refusing to sit at the back of a bus? It initiated the civil rights struggle. What was the significance of Petrarch's ascent of the mountain? It initiated the Renaissance. The meaning and significance of each event is formally constituted, in part, by placing it within the context of a narrative sentence and a temporal structure. That is what part of the logic of narrative

sentences is about: placing events within these larger, time-constrained developments.

The Relativity of Historical Knowledge: Three Mistaken Charges

Danto is also concerned to discuss what we might call the relativity of historical knowledge. One of the charges made by many historians — particularly figures like Charles Beard and Carl Becker — is that history is never really an objective science, however cleverly Hempel may argue. History, they claim, is always relative in some sense or another. Danto begins by responding to three mistaken charges of relativism which argue that history cannot give us any sort of reasonable knowledge.

The first is a positivist view, which runs something to the effect that statements about the past are meaningless because they cannot be verified — that is, because they cannot be reduced to statements about present experience. To say that George Washington crossed the Delaware, on this view, can refer to nothing, since that event can no longer be witnessed. There is no possible present experience of that event available to us, and for that reason the statement is meaningless.

The problem with this view is that it assumes understanding or verification requires a kind of phenomenal awareness — literally that it would hinge on one's sense data, that one would have to have been present. But can phenomenalism ever capture tense sentences — sentences whose truth value depends on the time of their utterance? To say that Ronald Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter as president is true in 1981, 1982, or any time thereafter. Would it be true to say that in 1973? That is precisely the point of a tensed sentence. A phenomenal interpretation of verification never captures that tensing. Moreover, all of our experience is, strictly speaking, of the past. Even from a neurological standpoint, our experience of

what we think of as present states is the result of the previous firing of neurons, synapses, and nerves. So all experience is, in fact, of the past. Why a gap of three nanoseconds is somehow acceptable while a gap of three hundred years is not is entirely unclear. There is no principled reason for that distinction.

The second charge is from Bertrand Russell. He offered a skeptical argument he thought might prove that history could be bunk. Suppose, he says, the world was created five minutes ago — and with it, all the evidence about the past was created along with it. Sure, we find the Declaration of Independence with all the right carbon dating, but it is logically possible that it was created five minutes ago with that carbon dating already built in. In that case, all of our statements about the past would be false, because there was no past. Therefore, history might just be bunk.

Danto's strategy here is very clever. He points out that if we accept five minutes, we have to ask why not four minutes. If we accept four, why not three? If three, why not two? And eventually we get down to a nanosecond. When we get to a nanosecond, we discover that this is not specifically a charge against history at all — it is just skepticism. If it is a nanosecond, then all of our scientific knowledge is equally subject to the same debunking. So what Russell is really raising is not historical skepticism but skepticism in general. And he is right — skepticism is a possible point of view. But it is no more so for history than for any other discipline. Since there is no principled difference here, Danto can invoke the principle of non-vacuous contrast: it is not a fair charge against history if everything else is equally guilty of it.

The third charge is the only one Danto takes to be genuinely serious, and it is the one raised by historians themselves: that historians are simply too biased, too politically interested, and too engaged in special pleading for their own ideological views to achieve sufficient

objectivity to tell the truth. History, on this view, is fundamentally relative to the prejudices of the historian.

To begin with, this charge confuses two quite different things: the cause of a belief and the grounds for believing it. A historian might write a history text precisely because it will support his political agenda. That does not mean that one would be justified in believing it because of that agenda, nor does it mean the history is false. He might write it for the most base reasons, and yet it might still be the truth. The truth has nothing to do with the motivations that led him to write it. It has to do with the evidence. Yes, it is true that historians are not always scrupulously objective and that they have their political hobby horses and axes to grind. But that has nothing to do with the truth of what they write — it only explains what causes them to write what they write.

Moreover, history is no more guilty of ideological bias than science. Scientists, too, have ideological motivations. The history of science is replete with cases of scientists trying to manipulate fossil evidence for religious reasons. The science of phrenology in the nineteenth century was developed within anatomy in part to justify the existence of slavery in the American South. In the Soviet Union, a distinctive genetics was demanded by Lysenko and held to be scientifically true because it was a Stalinist, Marxist proletarian science. In Germany, Einstein's theories were officially rejected during the 1930s by some eminent scientists because he was Jewish — his work was dismissed as decadent Jewish science, to be replaced by a pure Aryan Germanic science. The charge that history is uniquely ideologically motivated is therefore mistaken. Everyone has ideological motivations, and that has nothing to do with whether their views are tenable. It simply explains what caused them to arrive at the views they did.

Both history and science always organize evidence and accounts relative to a scheme. The difference is that the historical scheme is

narrative — it is a story, and what Danto calls emplotment. What underlies this third critique is the belief that historical truth or objectivity consists in recounting the past as it really was, in and of itself, and that the historian must fail — either because he is too biased, or perhaps more profoundly, because he does not have all the details. Only someone who could have been there and taken down every detail could have given us a truly objective, complete account of what occurred.

The Ideal Chronicler

To respond to this objection, Danto posits exactly what such a critic would want. He calls it the ideal chronicler. Let us imagine a machine, created from the beginning of time, which records every event and every detail as it happens. We will call its recording the Ideal Chronicle. This Ideal Chronicle has a notation with a time and a place and marks every event that has ever happened in all of history. One would think that the Ideal Chronicle would be the perfect history — completely objective. But there are some things it cannot contain.

It cannot contain tense sentences. All of its sentences are in the present tense, because they are instantaneous observations. So it does not actually have any narratives within it, and it does not have any project verbs. It cannot say that so-and-so is planting cotton. It can say that so-and-so steps forward at moment T, that at moment T-plus-one so-and-so picks up a spade, that at moment T-plus-two he puts the spade into the earth and turns it over. But it cannot describe those activities as a temporally extended event called planting cotton or planting roses.

The Ideal Chronicle also cannot contain narrative sentences. It cannot say that in September of 1939, the Second World War began. Because on that very date, the Second World War had not yet begun — the war was not declared until somewhat later, and in fact it was

not named the Second World War until later still. It cannot say that in 1932, Roosevelt began his triumphal presidency and led the nation through the New Deal, because that would not have been true until later. So it cannot use narrative sentences. It cannot explain the significance of events. It might serve as a source for historians — perhaps for finding precise details about when a particular act took place — but it could never actually produce history. The Ideal Chronicle could never be history itself.

The point is that the charge against the historian — that he is necessarily relative because he cannot have all the detail — is mistaken. Having all the detail would not solve the problem. History cannot be produced from all the detail alone, because all the detail cannot supply what history needs: tense sentences, narrative sentences, and project verbs.

The Genuine Relativity of Historical Knowledge

Nonetheless, there is a certain genuine relativity to historical knowledge, and it is a result of the very logic of narrative sentences themselves. Since the significance of an event is always described in terms of some later event, the significance of what we do today hangs on the outcome of that action. As the old expression has it, hindsight is 20/20 — our temporal distance gives us an advantage over historical participants and agents. When we say the historian could never really understand an event unless he had been there to see everything, that is precisely wrong. The person who was at the event could not understand everything. Only we can, because we know what actually happened and what it was really about.

But this also means something else: the significance of each event continues to change as it produces new outcomes. Consider someone who knocks on the door of a house in seventeenth-century England, goes in and sees a woman giving birth, and says, "Madam,

unto you is born the greatest physicist of our century." We would immediately summon the authorities. That statement is not true at that moment. But a historian seventy years later can say, "On that night, in that house, unto Mrs. Newton was born the greatest physicist of that century." That is the significance of narrative sentences and the privilege they confer on those who come later. One could not have known that the infant Isaac would be the greatest physicist of the age. What Mrs. Newton herself almost certainly thought was simply an easier or harder labor — just one more son — turns out to carry far greater significance than she could ever have imagined. The participants could never have known what was really involved.

When Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, she did not know she was starting the civil rights movement. She was tired and did not want to move. She had no idea she was initiating a mass movement — but she was. We know that because that was the result and the outcome.

At the same time, the significance of an event changes as its outcomes accumulate. Suppose we had asked participants what happened on July 2nd, 1776 — the date on which independence was actually declared, though the document was signed on the 4th. They might say: thirteen different states declared independence from an empire, from a king. If we asked them twelve years later, they would say: the thirteen colonies began to assert their freedom. If we asked them twenty or thirty years later, they would say: that was the moment at which the creation of the United States began. The meaning had changed because the consequences had changed — a federal constitution had come along. If we went down to Mississippi forty or fifty years after 1776 and asked someone, they might say: that was the beginning of our fundamental mistake in getting involved with these Yankee mud-sills. That was not the beginning of

the creation of the American republic; it was the beginning of a very bad diplomatic arrangement. Another thirty years on, and they might say: that was the moment the seeds were laid for this cataclysmic struggle we have just lived through — the Civil War. The point is that the meaning of an event changes as it produces new outcomes, and it is constantly producing new outcomes.

When we talk about the creation of the Cold War — the birth of the Iron Curtain — twenty years ago one might have said this was the beginning of an incredible tragedy, that war hawks had produced an incredible tension in the world and threatened to blow it up with nuclear weapons. But asked more recently, some might give a very different answer: that it was not really the beginning of a global catastrophe, but rather the continuation of the unfinished business of the Second World War. We had destroyed one totalitarian dictatorship and were putting pressure on another, and it turned out we would succeed with that one too — we had finished the job we had started. The meaning of that event could not have been known in 1984; it was hotly contested, and one could have made an excellent argument for the negative view at the time. In hindsight, however, a strong case can be made for a very different reading. And should Soviet power reemerge in the coming years, the event may acquire yet another meaning entirely, reverting to the negative sense of the war hawks.

It is for that reason that our historical knowledge really is relative: it is relative to our temporal perspective, relative to the ever-changing present within which we live. And it is for that reason that historical knowledge is necessarily incomplete — incomplete because of the unknowability of the future. The meaning of the past hangs intensely on what has yet to happen.

History as Neither Art nor Science

Danto wants to argue that history is neither an art nor a science. Rather, it has elements of each. It has artistic elements in that it is a narrative, a story, and stories can be told well or poorly. Those who have read history texts will recognize the difference immediately. There are history texts that are remarkably well researched, remarkably well conceived, and that put one to sleep after about three pages. There are others that one loves to read, which are wonderful, gripping, exciting, and fun — but which are largely wrong, characterized by shoddy scholarship and poor use of footnotes. That is the artistic dimension of history.

Nonetheless, there are scientific elements as well. Danto does accept Hempel's thesis that historical explanation is nomothetic — that it requires, to some extent, the use of general laws. Yet at the same time, he tempers that. He gives the example of when Grace Kelly came to Monaco and the people hung the American flag on the occasion of her first visit. Is that in fact a nomothetic sort of explanation? It could be — but it would have to be redescribed in more general terms. One would have to say that the people of one country were honoring a visiting dignitary of another, that in such situations, when the visiting dignitary is about to become a member of the royal family, one honors them through some ritual display, of which hanging the flag is an instance. Yes, it can be reduced to the sort of general laws Hempel discussed. But the historian is not interested in doing that, because he is not interested in the general features of the situation. He is interested in Monaco itself — in what they did on that particular day. So although explanation is nomothetic, the interest of the historian is ideographic: it is in the particular and the unique. He is not interested in rituals of display in general; he is interested in what happened in Monaco on that day.

In fact, most historical descriptions are far too specific to admit directly of deduction from general laws. They would have to be

recharacterized in a much more general way — the firing on Fort Sumter would have to be redescribed as one civilization showing force toward another when competing for control of a single state, and so on. That is possible, and undoubtedly it is epistemologically presumed, which is why history does have some scientific elements. But it is not what we actually find in historical writing, because it is not what the historian is actually interested in.

What history does is explain change — change from one state to another — and it does so by telling stories, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Danto points out that whenever we hear about the Hegelian dialectic and its thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, it is just a pompous German way of inflating narrative. What is the thesis but the beginning? What is the antithesis but the middle of the story? And what is the synthesis but the end? It is a very long-winded way of saying what any competent director already knows: every story must have a plot, a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning presents the initial conditions. Something enters in conflict with them — the causal agency — and results in a conclusion.

In fact, we might think of narrative explanation as the most basic form of causal explanation. The middle event is the cause of the change from beginning to end. When our human ancestors explained things in the world, they always told stories. Perhaps that was when we first began working toward a primitive form of the causal nexus. Myths are precisely primitive versions of causal theories. They begin in the first times — the initial conditions. Then something comes along and enters the story as the causal force. And the result follows. Narrative is therefore a particular form of causal explanation, perhaps primitive, perhaps less formal, but nonetheless capable of being translated into complete causal, law-like explanations by assigning times and re-describing events. The same can be done in reverse: scientific explanations can be translated into

stories, converted into tense sentences. Rather than F = MA, we can describe a particular force in terms of the masses and acceleration involved. The key is not that we should prefer narrative to deductive explanation, but rather that both are adequate for giving us a sense of causality and the way causal change works.

Empathetic Understanding: Verstehen

I want to turn now to the idea of empathetic understanding, as articulated by Collingwood, which Danto examines under the German term Verstehen — "understanding." He has no doubt that historians engage in this all the time as a heuristic technique, to get inside the heads of historical agents. But it is never a formal or explanatory device, and here Danto agrees with Hempel. Moreover, it can never help us reconstruct historical experience. When historians claim to give us a sense of what it felt like to be a Roman or a Greek — to get inside that experience — they are mistaken on at least two counts. First, in a phenomenological sense, one can never know what it felt like to be anyone else. All one knows are one's own feelings; one cannot access someone else's neural structure. Second, even if one really believed it felt qualitatively different to have been alive at one point rather than another, one could never describe it, because all of one's language is grounded in one's own phenomenal experiences of the present, and one has no terms adequate to describe those alien phenomenal experiences. So even if one could somehow access them, one could neither describe nor explain them.

The idea that history can teach us the inside of events — what they felt like, reconstructing and reenacting past experience — is therefore a fundamental mistake. Reenactment may be a means toward an understanding that results in historical explanation, but it is not itself explanation. It is just a heuristic step on the way. Nor need we limit ourselves to the intentionalist presuppositions of the Verstehen theorists — the idea that what we need to understand an

event is to categorize it in terms of the thought of the agent himself. An excellent example of this belief is the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, who has argued that any explanation of an event must be in terms that the agent himself would have accepted, or else it is not a valid historical explanation. Danto thinks that is absurd. We can certainly know better than someone else what they were about. That would be like saying that if a particular person believes he is having a religious and divine experience, we have to characterize it as a religious and divine experience, even if we now know that the person was undergoing a bizarre neurotic or psychotic episode. We need not limit ourselves to the categories of past agents simply because we now know more than they did.

In fact, we never limit ourselves to getting the intentions of other people even in ordinary life. We read the causes of their behavior by observing it. When someone starts screaming at you, you do not say, "Now hold on — how are you feeling? Are you angry? I want to try to understand what is motivating you." You see facial expressions, and from that you deduce that the person is angry. The historian works the same way. He does not need to get inside anyone's head. In fact, we always know more than the agents, precisely because we have hindsight: we know the consequences of their actions, and they did not. That is precisely why we know more than they do.

Substantive Philosophy of History

Finally, I want to turn to Danto's critique of what he calls substantive philosophy of history. Historians use narrative sentences and project verbs to describe previous events on the basis of their outcomes or results. We thus assign the meaning of an event or epoch on the basis of its end state. The meaning of Petrarch's climb of the mountain was that it initiated the Renaissance. But the problem with substantive philosophy of history — by which Danto means thinkers like Hegel, Marx, and the Whig historians with their cult of progress

— is that such figures offer an account of all of history, including the future as well as the past. The substantive philosopher of history differs from the ordinary historian not only in the scope of his discourse, but also in that he speaks of the present and the past in relation to the future, and he speaks about the future in a way which most of us would only use to speak about the past.

This is both what is fascinating and what is problematic about substantive philosophy of history. When one speaks about the future with that degree of certitude, that is not prediction — that is prophecy. That is what Moses did. It is what people who climb mountains and come down with divine messages do. It is for that reason that this sort of meta-history or substantive philosophy of history — the coming revolution in Marx, the coming to full consciousness of the World Spirit in Hegel — is not in fact history, but prophecy. And the knowledge of the past that is based on that certainty of the future is similarly dubious. Consider: in Marxism, we are led to think that the bourgeois epoch is bad — not because it is the worst that has ever existed, for it is arguably the best, but because it is not as good as communism, which will come in the future. If we do not know what the future holds, we are left with the conclusion that the bourgeois mode of existence is the best there has ever been, and that capitalism is to be admired. It is only because communism will supposedly solve all the problems of history that we come to judge it negatively.

To sum up: our knowledge of the past is always limited by our ignorance of the future. That is why history is always incomplete. And that is why, with each generation, it requires rewriting, rethinking, and reformulating. For each generation knows better than the one before it what the consequences of every action have been.

Lecture 13: Social History, Structuralism, and the *Longue Durée* — Fernand Braudel's *On History*

Fernand Braudel was one of the most celebrated practitioners of the French Annales School of social and economic history, and he represents a distinct movement in the practice of history with profound theoretical, interpretive, and philosophical implications. He wrote many famous and massive historical tomes, but what we will examine today are some of his reflections on the practice and process of history in its most abstract form, collected in a series of essays called *On History*.

The school from which he comes, the Annales School, was founded by the famous French historians Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929. In many ways it represents a very stark challenge, and perhaps even a counter-example, to the model of historiography we encountered with Danto and other analytic narrativists. Any thinker who stresses a narrative and story-like interpretation of historical writing will find a great challenge in the writing of any of the Annales School thinkers, whether that be Braudel or even Marc Bloch's brilliant multi-volume study of feudal society. These texts almost appear sociological in nature. Their studies rarely seem to deal with change, with dramatic events, or with the story of before and after. They are much more interpretive in their strategies, and we will be concerned with looking at the nature of those interpretive strategies, the sort of history that emerges from them, and the resulting ramifications for the interpretation and meaning of history.

Braudel represents the confluence not only of the Annales School, but of another important philosophical and anthropological

movement in post-war France known as structuralism. Structuralism, as we will see, is best exemplified in social theory by the French structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser, and in anthropology by the famed structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. What we find in Braudel is a mixture of these two elements — the historical and the structural — and his reflections on and practice of history bear the imprint of both. The American version of Braudel's vision of history came to be known as the new social history, and it came into its own in the mid to late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. It captures much of the flavor, the ideology, the structural component, and the accent that characterized what was considered a very exciting, radical, and innovative approach to understanding the human past.

History and Sociology: Braudel's Approach

We begin by noting that for Braudel, history is more than just the before and after of events. It is more than a chronicle of one thing after another. It is more than — and here he is in direct contrast to Danto — storytelling. Fundamentally, what the historian is after is not so much a story, a recounting of a set of events, but an understanding of the nature of a society: its culture, its institutions, its practices. These may or may not be best illuminated through dramatic stories and tales; they may be better illuminated through other means. In fact, they may be best illuminated through the sort of careful structural analysis we find in figures like Max Weber.

For Braudel, what really distinguishes the historian from the sociologist is not methodology or approach, but rather the fact that the historian has a slightly more ideographic interest — a slightly greater concern with particularities. Both the historian and the sociologist look to what we will call models. The difference is that the sociologist is interested in the model for its own sake. The historian is like a child who treats a model as a toy ship: he is interested not so much in the model for its own sake, but in putting it on a particular

body of water to see how it floats. He wants to place the model in a particular historical context and see what it teaches him about that context. The historian is also different from the sociologist in that he must be concerned to some extent with development — not only with static structures, but with change over time and development across space. He deals with a before and after, with a set of changes, but not necessarily the dramatic narrative sort of changes assumed by thinkers like Danto.

The Three Time Spans of Historical Analysis

Braudel begins by acknowledging that change does not necessarily occur at a steady rate. Different changes take place over different spans of time, and accounting for these different changes and their different rhythms requires a different sense of historical time. Each sort of change requires a distinct historical framework — a scope, a scale, a time frame — appropriate to encapsulating, understanding, and explaining it. We will therefore discuss what Braudel identifies as the three principal time spans of historical analysis and relate them to the distinct temporal rhythms of social development.

The History of the Event

The first sort of time Braudel identifies is what he calls the history of the event. By this he means a relatively brief time span suited to the study of things like major events, wars, revolutions, and political campaigns, and also suited to the study of individuals. This is clearly the model of history that Danto has in mind: histories of things like the Civil War, biographies, studies of elections, and the rise of a political party. These are exactly the sorts of events about which one could write a narrative — a brief story with a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end, filled with dramatic twists and turns. This is the kind of history that most scholars consider traditional. The vast bulk of

historical texts study events and short time spans, perhaps five to eight years at the outside.

This time span has an extremely journalistic quality to it, absorbed with dramatic twists, turns, plot changes, and exciting revelations. It is the sort of history very similar to what one finds in headlines and on the front page of a newspaper. And for this reason, like journalism, it is the obvious form of political history — a form whose particular appeal lies in its dramatic turns, in the revelation of corruption, in the fall of a minister or a cabinet member. Those are the sorts of quick, dramatic, exciting events that sell newspapers and obviously supply the material for exciting brief political histories.

Braudel notes, however, that although political history is primarily what is conducive to this brief history of the event, all features of social life participate to some extent in this time span. We could think of histories of science in which a brief and very dramatic period takes center stage: Kurt Gödel ruminating and struggling to develop the incompleteness proof and work out the arithmetization of metamathematics. The history of the Manhattan Project — the construction of the atomic bomb — is a very dramatic, short-term history. Within the art world, one could write of Michelangelo's painting the Sistine Chapel: a dramatic story with a relatively brief time span. So all social life, to some extent, participates in this temporal rhythm.

It is understandable, then, that the history of the event would have been so popular. But to the extent that it has come to predominate all other sorts of social time — so much so that it is the first thing we think of when we think of history — this is, for Braudel, a sign that we are far too focused on our own present. The reason we are so concerned with brief time spans is because we live within brief time spans. We live fairly short lives. The events that seem most profound to us are those we have ourselves experienced. We cannot help

feeling that all of history, all of its significant events, must occur within a similar time rhythm. Because an important conjunction in our own life may have lasted four years — a college education, or seven years with a particular corporation — we unconsciously project that same rhythm onto the past.

This is understandable, since our own lives do genuinely participate in that temporal duration. And yet it does a violence to the past, which may have deeper and more fundamental rhythms that deserve examination. In fact, Braudel feels that this time span is superficial: it only engages the very surface of history. The dramatic twists and turns, according to him, really come and go, and are not necessarily what is most important. Yes, one can look at Kurt Gödel pacing his room, thinking his way through a particular problem. But over the long view, someone else would have solved it if not him. The more important question is the development of, say, the quantifier over the hundred years that preceded his work. We might think of the history of the event, for Braudel, as a kind of micro-history — a history of minutia. A history that focuses on the Second World War and features famous figures like Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, and Mussolini is a micro-history in the sense that the real explanation of the Second World War, its deepest origins, may lie as far back as the development of the steam engine or the gradual technical and political transformations that made the whole conjuncture possible. Those are the real players. Braudel uses the metaphor of a body of water to describe this: the history of the event studies only the very surface — the white water breaking up occasionally — and mistakes that surface for the entirety of the body of water.

The Conjuncture

The next time span is that of the conjuncture, or large-scale juncture, which is an intermediate time span usually running somewhere between about twenty and fifty years. It might aptly be called

cyclical, because it studies normal cycles. By Braudel's time, the Annales School had produced a sufficient number of interesting conjunctural histories that we had good examples to draw on. Economic history, for example, is almost always conjunctural. The best economic histories study twenty-to-fifty-year cycles that represent natural durations: a business cycle, or the rise and fall of prices, generally has a rhythm of somewhere between twenty and fifty years. The period between recessions runs approximately that same span. These social developments have an extremely different rhythm than, say, an election campaign. And in a sense, one can see why Braudel would think this is a deeper level: it is, after all, the economy that elects and unelects presidents, moving its currents below the surface of dramatic campaign events.

But economic history and the business cycle are not the only social developments that operate at the rhythm of the conjuncture. The history of technology works at a conjunctural level: we can speak of the age of solid-state technology, followed by the age of the transistor, followed by the age of the microchip, each with roughly a fifteen-to-thirty-year lifespan. We can talk about steam power being followed by the age of fossil fuels, the Bessemer steel process being followed by more refined processes. Each of these technical cycles has a distinct generational life, sometimes twenty years, sometimes fifty, generally within one or several human lifespans.

The history of science works on a conjunctural level as well. There is the Galilean age, the Newtonian age, the age of great chemical discovery in the eighteenth century. Great breakthroughs in the history of science are not best understood in terms of dramatic twists and turns at the individual level. Thinking of Albert Einstein deep in rumination only gives us the surface of understanding the history of science. A more profound understanding of what Einstein achieved requires looking back to the Michelson-Morley experiment and other

nineteenth-century results, and forward to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics. Most of the development occurs over more extended periods: we move from the age of Newtonian mechanics to the age of Einsteinian mechanics to the age of quantum mechanics, and now appear to be entering another conjuncture — the search for the grand unified theory.

Perhaps the most immediately intuitive examples come from the history of art. Consider Renaissance painting: in Florence, it lasted approximately fifty years, followed by the Baroque — another style, another conjuncture. One could not do justice to the development of Baroque painting in Italy through a history of brief dramatic occurrences; one would need to look at a series of artists across a twenty-to-fifty-year time span. Similarly for the Northern Renaissance. Cubism lasts about twenty-five to thirty years. Impressionism, about thirty years. A dramatic story about Vincent van Gogh chopping off his ear makes for a good film. But does it give us a real understanding of what was going on in Impressionism? One needs a larger time span — one that dwarfs the individual and brings into play the set of forces that produced a similar style among figures as varied as van Gogh, Monet, Manet, and Renoir.

In all of these time spans, what emerges is that the individual who is the subject of the history of the event is dwarfed by these larger-scale social and cultural transformations. Such histories — histories of the business cycle, histories of science, histories of artistic style — are not as dramatic as event-centered histories. But what they lose in drama and excitement they more than compensate for in profundity. There is a depth to these sorts of histories, a resonance in the deep causal forces they engage, that more than makes up for the absence of glitter and dramatic turns. Returning to Braudel's water metaphor: if the history of the event is the surface, then the time of the conjuncture is like a current lying beneath the wave crests, one that

informs and moves those crests. Once one understands these deeper levels of time, one can with them explain why the waves form at all. Once one understands the development of the quantifier, the development of Peano arithmetic, and the attempt among logicians in the early twentieth century to complete the formalization of mathematics — pursued by figures like Cantor, Frege, and Bertrand Russell in his *Principia Mathematica*, and then culminating after Löwenheim in the work of Kurt Gödel — then one can explain in a much more profound sense what Gödel was doing and why it mattered.

The *Longue Durée*

This brings us to the third and most profound time span for Braudel: history and the *longue durée*. The *longue durée* means, literally, the long duration — and it is the longest time span of any sort of social development, measured not in decades but in centuries.

What are some examples? Ecological history is one. William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* studies the topography of the New England landscape over roughly five hundred years, examining how the ecology of a particular region changes over that vast span. The changes are extremely slow and gradual, and yet over that span there seems to be a unity in operation: deforestation produces changes in rainfall patterns, which in turn change disease gradients, which impact human population densities. Geographical history is another example — the histories of borders between nations may unfold over a six or seven-hundred-year epoch. Freezing the line at any particular moment and asking whether Alsace-Lorraine is French or German yields only a transient answer. Seeing it over a seven-hundred-year stretch may reveal an ongoing process, perhaps one of gradual amalgamation, perhaps pointing toward a construction of identity based on a combination of distinct linguistic and ethnic backgrounds — something like what we find in Switzerland.

The most sweeping examples of this time span are the histories of civilizations. Civilizations develop over hundreds of years. Any sensible history of Rome must begin with the removal of the Etruscans and run to at least the fourth century AD — and then it may continue another eight hundred years if one includes the Eastern Empire, later called the Byzantine Empire. Consider how this changes our perspective on, say, the two World Wars. When placed in the context of the history of Western civilization, they become brief temporary aberrations and blips — particular moments of civil conflict not tremendously different from the Wars of the Roses, the War of the Austrian Succession, the Anglo-French wars of the eighteenth century, or the religious wars of the seventeenth. They become part of a recurring pattern. They seem less dramatic, less dynamic, and part of a larger ongoing structure. There has been a fundamental problem of the balance of power among emergent nation-states since the rise of absolutism in about the sixteenth century, and power moves first from the Iberian Peninsula, then through the northern continental mainland, finally to England, and is challenged by Central Europe — until power eventually becomes distributed among the two great frontier lands: to the west, the North American mainland, and to the east, Russia.

Returning once more to the water metaphor: if the history of the event is the surface, and the history of the conjuncture is the current beneath the waves, then the history of the *longue durée* is the tidal force — the most fundamental, deep-moving force governing the entire body of water, operating at the rhythm of celestial bodies. The history of the *longue durée* is one of almost imperceptible movement. Braudel himself wrote one — a history of essentially peasant life in Europe across an immense stretch of time and space, absolutely magnificent in scope. It is a history in which there is almost no change whatsoever. Imagine someone writing a history of feudalism that begins around 600 AD and ends around 1300 AD —

that is precisely what Marc Bloch did, in a wonderful text, and yet almost nothing happens in it. The chapters are things like heraldry — an explanation of the meaning of heraldry and how it functioned — followed by a chapter on the peasant, the manor, the serf, the lord, the court, the canon law. Each of these examined with richness and care, but without any sense of dramatic change and transformation. It is an almost still time, an almost non-moving rhythm. It is only in its interest in the particular and in development that this kind of history differs from sociology; it is only in its ideographic character that it is distinguished from the sort of structural work that Max Weber did.

Structures and Models

Each of these time spans has its own virtues, and different parts of society develop along different rhythms. The great virtue of the first time span is that it is dramatic. Braudel says this is "the time span of the wise man" — a phrase that may initially seem puzzling, but which becomes clear when one asks what sort of things a wise man teaches. He teaches: the more things change, the more they stay the same. There is nothing new under the sun. The wise man teaches eternal verities — things which hold across time and space. They may seem like worn-out pieties, but they are in fact practical rules of action. They are not science; they are not theory; they are wisdom. And that is what this time span also offers. Very little change actually occurs at this level, and what it reveals is how, no matter how many revolutions sweep through Europe, peasants in the south of France do not live fundamentally differently than they did eight hundred years ago. They may have cars, but the basic patterns of life are not very different: life still centers around the local church, marriage patterns are nearly identical, labor patterns are nearly identical, dietary patterns are nearly identical. Merchants still engage in the same fundamental practices as their ancestors in the Hanseatic

League: they buy cheap and sell dear, they engage in collective marketing programs, joint-stock companies, and double-entry bookkeeping. And even the university remains, in many ways, a fundamentally medieval guild. When one is made a Master of Arts, does that title not refer back to the old guild structure? When one does PhD training, is one not in fact an apprentice who becomes a journeyman during the degree program, being trained under a master who will decide when one has achieved mastery and can be released to practice the discipline independently? The history of the university as a guild of high cultural producers is exactly the kind of wisdom that the *longue durée* offers.

The *longue durée* discloses not the cycles we saw with the conjuncture, but what Braudel calls structures — structures which exist beneath the surface of events and which, together with the conjunctural, comprise what he calls unconscious history. What is a structure? Think of it as a distinct pattern of relationships between persons, institutions, and entities within a society. We could speak, for instance, of the feudal structure of relations — relations based on clientage, dependence, and mutuality among unequals, personal in character, hardly codified in law yet registered by ritual acts such as bowing before a lord, being knighted for military service, or being given a kiss on the mouth to signify bonding and affection. Very often, the entire pattern or structure of such relationships may not be something any particular person within the society is consciously aware of. They may be aware of discrete elements but not of the full pattern. In that way it is unconscious. Nonetheless, those structures can be inferred through careful observation of behavior. People may not have recognized that the feudal social structure was fundamentally one of personal hierarchy and clientage across all domains; they may have seen it in military service without seeing it in religious orders. But in retrospect, we can observe that bishops stand toward the clerics beneath them in the position of protector — they

have their separate courts, and those lower persons can be understood, in a sense, as their vassals.

The linguistic expression of these structures Braudel calls models. A model is a copy of a structure: structures exist in society, models exist in our accounts of those structures. What these models identify are the most basic entities within a domain and the relations between them. We have several well-known examples. Weber's models of legitimate authority distinguish three types: charismatic authority, legal-rational authority, and traditional authority — different models exhibiting different structured relationships within a society. Similarly in Marxism, modes of production are models of economic structures: a capitalist mode of production, an antique mode, an Asiatic mode, followed eventually by a socialist and then communist mode.

Braudel also draws comparisons to other fields that employ this kind of structural modeling. Phonemic linguistics, for instance, claims that all language can be broken down to a discrete number of phonemes — basic sounds, usually of one syllable — and that all words in any language can be constructed from combinations of these sounds. Once one has worked out the pattern of possible constructions, one can categorize not only what languages exist but what their affiliations are. If certain phonemic constructions are extremely common in Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, there is reason to believe they derive from a common ancestral language — as, indeed, we now believe. The similarity between the Persian *deva*, the Latin *deus*, and the Sanskrit equivalent for "deity" is a clear example of this structural affinity. Braudel also draws a comparison to sub-molecular physics as another case where phenomena are broken down into their smallest constituent entities and the pattern of relationships between them is modeled. But perhaps the most instructive example in the human sciences is Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss

examined the behavior of totemic and traditional communities and found that, in a strange sense, all marriages were communications or exchanges structured around the totemic operators of various clans, sibs, and tribes. Marrying a woman was, in a formal structural sense, making a particular kind of statement addressed to her father or uncle — the determining factor in the exchange. No one in the society may have been consciously aware of this. But it turns out, with near-mathematical precision, that this is always how the system works out when the cases are examined carefully. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss works out a full mathematics of this, producing a chart showing that if one comes from the bear clan and one's maternal uncle is from the eagle clan, one will be required to marry someone from the snake clan — if, say, one is an Eskimo from a particular region.

Social Mathematics: Three Languages

Braudel calls for structuralist historians — those working at the level of the *longue durée* in particular — to employ that kind of social mathematics in their own research. He has in mind three distinct modes of rigorous language, both natural and artificial, which he calls, somewhat obscurely, three languages.

The first he calls the language of necessary facts. What he seems to mean by this is not a literal mathematics but a modeling of social structures based on a straightforward deductive model — the use of nomological general laws. Something like: a decline in the rate of mortality, combined with constant food production, will always lead, over the long run, to famine. A straight causal deduction.

The second language he calls the language of contingent facts. By this he means probabilistic hypotheses rather than absolute general laws — probability formulations that admit of exceptions. At this level one might say: the intrusion of a virgin-soil epidemic into an

area generally leads to a particular die-off rate — but not always, and only generally.

The third and last of his languages is what he calls the language of conditioned facts. What he has in mind here is something akin to game theory — a theoretical model of strategies and outcomes. Consider the classic example: three prisoners are each accused of a certain crime, isolated from one another. If one rats on the others, he will receive reduced time while the others receive more. If none of them rat, they may all get off. What are the consequences of various behaviors on each of their parts? One works out all the probabilities and all the possibilities. That is game theory, and it is precisely this kind of modeling that Braudel wishes to see applied to the history of the *longue durée* — systematically asking what the range of possibilities is, and what would happen under various conditions of action and practice.

Social History and History from the Bottom Up

In the United States, the social history that emerged as an analogue to Braudel's project never really employed game theory, and it never became particularly invested in social mathematics as such — that was a distinctly French structuralist preoccupation. But it did accent, to an even greater degree than Braudel perhaps had in mind, one of structuralism's greatest appeals: the recovery of the history of everyday life.

Consider one of the structures that persists over five hundred years, even in a relatively short history like that of the United States. Think about cooking. The prevalence of fried cooking in Virginia and the American South, according to the historian David Hackett Fischer, derives from the particular region of England from which most Virginians originally came, where frying had been the dominant cooking method for centuries. That folk way was transplanted intact

and persisted long after the development of ovens, well through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, and continues to emerge in the vocabulary that developed around it — words like *fricassee*, and practices like the barbecue. The Puritans who founded New England, on the other hand, came from East Anglia, a region profoundly shaped by Dutch influence, where cooking in ovens was the norm. The principal form of cooking there was baking — things like pot pies — and in particular the baking of peas and beans. Boston, of course, is to this day known as Bean Town: that structure has persisted for roughly five hundred years, transplanted from East Anglia. The settlers of the Delaware Valley, meanwhile, came primarily from the northern Midlands of England, an extremely poor region where the absence of ovens meant that food was cooked almost exclusively by stewing. To this day, that region is characterized by the popularity of mashed potatoes and all manner of stews and stewed meats — despite the fact that the Delaware Valley became extremely prosperous very quickly. These are all structures, remarkably persistent across the centuries.

Structuralism thus allows us to recover histories of this kind: a history of cooking, a history of midwifery, a history of birthing practices. It was not always the case that doctors oversaw the delivery of children — that is a very recent development. For most of history, one went to midwives, and as long as midwives controlled the birthing process, they also exercised control over what we might call the abortion process, and it was not considered a particularly momentous matter. Even among the Puritans, abortion was an acceptable practice before the quickening — before the child first began to move. It is only when medical practice begins to displace that structure and to insert itself that a formal medical and social debate about the appropriateness of such procedures begins to take shape.

What emerges from this is an appreciation of the perennial appeal of social and structural history: the realization that political histories and histories of great events like the Second World War exclude at least ninety to ninety-five percent of the human species from the historical record. The great Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht once asked, sardonically, whether Caesar conquered Gaul without even a cook to help him — the cook, of course, does not make the history books. Rommel was such a desert fox — and wouldn't it have helped to have a few people riding tanks alongside him? As one of my own professors, a veteran of Patton's Third Army, used to say: sure, they called him Blood and Guts — it was our blood and our guts, and his glory.

That is exactly what social history recovers. Most people live their lives within patterns and structures that recur across centuries. If we are going to recover history from the domain of a tiny elite, it will only be through a social, structural history. Most people do not leave great poems or great historical legacies. They leave their lives, and their lives must be recovered structurally. In American history, this approach came to be called, perhaps most aptly of all, history from the bottom up. If you want to understand the American Revolution, forget Thomas Jefferson — let's talk about Jack Tar, as the historian Jesse Lemisch urged: the average seaman walking the streets of Boston. What was his life like? It was not Samuel Adams who carried out the Boston Massacre; it was urban artisans living in the streets of Boston who threw the tea overboard at the Boston Tea Party. What was their structural life like? That is the promise Braudel offers: to recover the experience of ordinary people and treat their lives as an integral part of the historical record. It is only structuralism that argues for, and makes possible, the recovery of the agency of the vast bulk of the human population.

Lecture 14: Poststructuralism and the Linguistic Turn — Hayden White's Introduction to *Metahistory*

Post-structuralism and the Role of Language

The linguistic turn in history corresponds to an extremely recent movement in meta-historical speculation — a particularly interesting, innovative, and powerful movement that has been gaining considerable traction, known as post-structuralism. The text we are going to examine today is one that is in many ways informed by the post-structural movement and its focus on language and the centrality of language in what is sometimes called the social construction of reality, but is better termed the linguistic, or in this case poetic, construction of reality.

We remember that Braudel was a structuralist. He believed that historians create models, much as scientists do, and that such models copy or correspond to discrete structures found in society, in the human past, in patterned relationships. Post-structuralists agree with thinkers like Braudel and Lévi-Strauss that language functions as a kind of model, and that theories and interpretations are models of the world. Where they disagree is in claiming that there are, in fact, no structures in the world to be modeled.

Rather than think of language as something which copies or mirrors the world, the post-structuralist holds that language in fact constitutes the world. The world in and of itself is a kind of booming buzz of confusion, a phenomenal chaos. We create a world by parsing it in terms of the words and concepts expressed in our language and in our everyday sentences. If that is done at the common-sense level with ordinary talk, at a theoretical level it is

done by theoretical talk. Simply by choosing to describe things in certain terms, we create a world for ourselves cut up according to those terms. That is why they are called post-structuralists: they obviously follow the structuralists and are deeply informed by structuralist work, but they deny the realist assumptions of structuralism — the assumption that the models we create in language actually correspond to, copy, or mirror the nature of reality. Post-structuralists refuse to allow that there is any nature to reality independently of our language. Reality really is, in a fundamental sense, just our language.

White's Project in *Metahistory*

What Hayden White offers in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* is a post-structural analysis of the historical work. The vast bulk of the text, much like Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, is a history of historiography — specifically of the nineteenth century, covering both philosophers such as Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, and historians including Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt. What we will be interested in, as with Collingwood, is the theoretical portion in which White sums up his actual views about the nature of history and historical understanding. In this case, that is the introduction — roughly twenty-five to thirty-five pages of some of the most absolutely fascinating, powerful, and lucid post-structural analysis I have ever encountered.

Post-structuralism, because of its playfulness, is a very difficult and acquired taste. It is extremely ironic and self-consciously perverse in its use of language — and deliberately so, because it wants to show you the perversity of language itself. For this reason, post-structuralist texts are almost always very difficult to gain access to. White is an exception: his introduction to *Metahistory* is one of the most admirably well-written and enjoyable works of post-structural interpretation.

White's post-structural analysis argues that history is in fact poetically constructed — that the past as we know it is a result of the different poetic and linguistic strategies we employ in describing it.

Before getting into those strategies, it is worth noting that White is also aware of the ideological motivations and significances that may lie behind historical consciousness as a phenomenon. The great rise of historicism in the nineteenth century — the sense of the absolute uniqueness of the past, the relativity of historical moments, and the inability to find a super-historical ground of judgment — was in fact a nineteenth-century innovation. White argues that it served as an ideological prop for Western industrial society, which looked back at its own past and the past of world history and treated each as separate and distinct, in order to justify its own existence and support its ongoing imperialist conquest of the rest of the world. For White, historical consciousness — his term for our awareness of the past as it developed in the nineteenth century — is at least in part an ideological move on the part of Westerners, which is, he suggests, precisely why it is unique to Westerners.

For this reason, White adopts what one might call an ironic mode of interpretation toward historical consciousness itself — which is an extremely difficult and doubly ironic position to occupy, since he is himself an historian. He practices the art of historical interpretation and yet sees that practice as in some fundamental sense flawed, mistaken, and ideological. That self-conscious irony is part of the perverse charm of post-structuralism: it is always playful. You are never really expected to take a post-structuralist work entirely seriously. If you do, you have missed the point.

The Historical Work and What It Mediates

For White, any historical work — any historical text we might examine — takes the form of narrative prose, specifically a narrative

prose essay. He sees the historical work as mediating between a variety of different features and issues, and it is worth laying out what these are.

The first is what he calls the **historical field**: the unprocessed past, the past in and of itself, to which the historian can never gain any sort of direct access. The history we know is always history that has already been processed — organized under some description, with certain elements accented and others eliminated. We drop what Napoleon ate for breakfast before Waterloo and stress the deployment of his troops. The second element the historical work mediates is the **unprocessed historical record** — the series of documents, artifacts, and archival notations which have yet to be formulated or interpreted in any particular way. The third is **other historical accounts**. Any historian studying, say, the American Revolution must begin by reading all of the important works on that subject, taking stock of what has already been written. His own work then mediates between his interpretation and the interpretations of preceding authors, as shown in footnotes and secondary allusions — Bernard Bailyn has argued such-and-such, but I agree with Nash that, and so forth. And finally, the work also mediates between all of these elements and an **audience**. A different audience will produce a different sort of historical work. Anyone who has read Barbara Tuchman, Theodore White, or some of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s popular writing will recognize the difference in style and footnoting compared to specialist scholarship. Popular texts are less dense, move more quickly, and are far more exciting narratively. Toynbee, for instance, was quite popular and had a large general readership — and specialists did not receive him warmly precisely because he was writing for a different audience.

The Five Levels of the Historical Work

The historical work itself is composed of what White calls five levels: chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument, and mode of ideological implication. The first two are relatively straightforward.

A **chronicle** is simply a temporal ordering of events — we take all the events that might be included in a history and place them on a timeline, from first to last. A **story** is a chronicle organized around certain initiating and concluding motifs: we take the events of a chronicle, perhaps trim some from the beginning and the end, and create a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. We recognize the use of such motifs by transitional words like "at first," "then," "finally," and "ultimately" — words that trigger shifts between stages and differentiate a mere chronicle from a story.

Explanation by Mode of Emplotment

Once a story has been produced, that story carries a particular kind of meaning based on the kind of story it is — the way it is emplotted. By framing a given set of events as a particular kind of narrative, the historian implicitly makes a claim about what it all adds up to and what it means. White identifies exactly four modes of emplotment.

The first is **romance**. A romance is a straightforward story of a hero who triumphs over adversity — always the triumph of good over evil. *PT-109*, *Profiles in Courage*, the Grail legend, King Arthur and his knights: in every case, these are optimistic stories about the forces of good prevailing over the forces of evil. If one plots the story of the Civil War as a romance, one is making a particular point: one side was good, the other was bad, good triumphed, and the result is a positive development in history that gives rise to optimism and even joy in surveying the spectacle of the past.

The second mode is **tragedy**. In a tragedy, the hero confronts some problem, fails to resolve it successfully, and falls. But in the process, the audience learns something — the fundamental laws of existence that the hero ran up against, exemplified in the hero's fall. As any

reader of Greek tragedy knows, the hero typically falls as a result of hubris, and from that fall we learn, as Clint Eastwood once put it, that a good man has to know his limitations. Many Southern historians have emplotted the Civil War as a tragedy: the same events that a Northern historian of 1871 might cast as a romance, the Southerner sees as a tragedy — a noble and righteous struggle undone by the recognition that courage and honor will not always prevail against overwhelming material force.

The third mode is **comedy**, in which temporary triumphs over adversity occur through the medium of reconciliation. Shakespearean comedy is the obvious paradigm: a conflict among the characters seems to be heading toward a breakdown of social harmony, but the result is reconciliation — typically in the form of marriage. The antagonists discover that they actually love each other, and all ends happily. One could emplot the Civil War as a comedy by arguing that this terrible conflict, which during Reconstruction seemed close to a complete violation of everything Southerners held dear, ultimately concluded with the North recognizing its overreach, extending the hand of friendship to the South, and allowing it to re-enter the nation — after which everything went well enough.

The fourth and final mode of emplotment is **satire**. A satire is a tale of diremption, in which death and the bad always win. Gibbon's history of the fall of the Roman Empire serves as a classic example: what wins out in the end is superstition, priestcraft, and a want of Roman virtue, and rather than the brutality of Rome being replaced by the brotherhood of man, a great civilization was simply replaced by superstitious priestcraft that set science back by centuries. A satirical history of the Civil War would say something to the effect that a massive struggle was fought under great ideals, at the end of which nothing had changed: African Americans returned to a state of debt peonage arguably worse than slavery, mass graves were filled,

and things simply fell apart. By the 1920s, it had become very common to emplot the First World War in this mode: what had initially been cast as a great romance — a noble struggle against the evils of Germany — came to be seen as a satire. Nothing was learned, it was a pointless war in which nothing was gained, and the belief in great ideals had led only to mass butchery.

Explanation by Mode of Formal Argument

In addition to emplotting a story in a particular kind of way, the historian also typically pauses to offer a more explicit argument about what it all means — what the moral of the story is. White calls this the mode of formal argument, and again identifies exactly four varieties.

The first is **formism**. In formism, we classify the objects in the historical field — institutions, persons, or behavioral patterns — and stress their unique characteristics. Formism exemplifies that ideographic concern on the part of historians for the particularity of events. A history of the American Revolution that stresses the American-ness of the Revolution and argues that it was unlike any other revolution — the product of a unique conjunction of forces, beliefs, and cultural mores — is a formist history. This kind of argument always produces fairly vacuous generalizations, but what it loses in explanatory power it more than compensates for in its capacity for vivid and lively description. Because it is interested in the ideographic and the particular, it can give you a rich sense of what it was like to be in Boston in 1760 — how Jack Tar walked the streets, what sort of rum he drank, and why his experience was not quite like that of any seaman anywhere else.

The second mode is **organicism**. Here the individual entities of the historical field are seen not as unique features but as elements of larger wholes — wholes that are always greater than the sum of their parts, genuine gestalts. Just as a brain is more than the mere sum of

its cells, an organic synthetic unity exceeds the elements of which it is composed. The obvious exemplar is Hegel: the way people made coffee, the sort of art they produced, the system of government they had, the particular form of liberty they practiced — all express something more fundamental, namely the spirit of the people, the *Volksgeist*, the essence of the nation. We hear this kind of thinking in expressions like "the American character," which synthesizes a range of disparate traits — egalitarianism, boisterousness, irreverence toward authority — and finds them expressed in the cult of professional sports, in voting patterns, in the failure to remove one's cap around superiors. All of these disparate elements are unified under one larger principle. Such organicist interpretations tend to be idealist, often Hegelian, and they convey an optimism about the growth of whatever organic whole — the spirit of a people, the character of a class — is identified as the subject of history.

The third mode is **mechanism**, which involves reductive strategies of argumentation. Rather than synthesis — showing how everything develops according to a unifying principle — mechanism reduces the variety of elements in the historical field to something deeper, in a law-like fashion. The way people engage in politics is really an expression of the mode of legitimate authority under which they operate, as Weber would argue. The kinds of political and legal institutions found in a society can really be reduced to the development of the mode of production, as Marx would argue. In mechanism, unlike formism, one is not interested in the unique features of a particular society. The society is examined only in order to arrive at the deeper causative laws beneath the surface. Unlike the organicist, the mechanist argues that the differences between, say, Americans and Englishmen are ultimately minuscule; what is really profound is what unites them — they are subject to the same laws of development based on the same modes of production or systems of legitimate authority. Mechanism thus shares with organicism an

abstract quality that often does violence to what is historically unique about a given society. The difference is that mechanism is concerned with laws rather than with principles.

The fourth mode is **contextualism** — a broadly functionalist analysis of a particular historical moment in which one places events within their context and shows how they functioned in relation to everything occurring around them. In some ways it resembles formism, in that the historical field is treated neither as a metaphysical realm of principles nor as a scientific domain subject to law, but as a unique spectacle with many things happening at once. And yet it also tries, like organicism, to be somewhat synthetic, subsuming the various events of a period under their contextual and functional background. Contextualism has a tendency toward structural analysis — the politics relate to the economy, which when placed in the context of gender relations helps explain further features of the field. It can often take what White calls a synchronic form of representation: rather than "first this happened and then that happened," the contextualist says "this happened at the same time as this other thing, and that is why it took the particular form it did."

Of the four modes of argumentation, two are considered orthodox within the historical profession: the overwhelming majority of practicing historians employ formism and contextualism, either treating historical fields as unique or placing things in their context. Organicism and mechanism are generally considered heterodox — dangerous extremes. To speak of the American mind makes people uneasy. To speak of laws of American development makes them more than uneasy. But White's argument is that the basis of this distinction between the orthodox and the heterodox is largely ideological. We dislike law-like explanations because we fear they will validate Marxism. We dislike arguments from organic principle because we fear they will lead to German idealism and then to the

absolutist state. Since this basis is ideological rather than epistemological, there are no serious rational grounds for dismissing either of the two heterodox modes of interpretation.

Explanation by Mode of Ideological Implication

This brings us to the mode of ideological implication. White's point is that every ideology carries historical implications: if one is a liberal, that has implications about what the past has been and where it is headed; similarly with conservatism or any other ideology. Equally, every historical argument or story carries ideological implications. If one tells the story of the American Revolution as a romance, the implication is that our Constitution is best as it stands and should be preserved — which means that radical revolutionaries are probably mistaken.

White identifies four basic ideologies, categorized according to the location of what we might call the golden age — the moment in history when things really worked, when things were as they should be. Every ideology orients itself with respect to that strong time.

Conservatives tend to place the golden age in the present. Hence their fundamental injunction: do not change anything. Things are about as good as they could possibly be. Leave them alone. You cannot improve on the present; you can only decline from it. Conservative histories accordingly tend to show how everything has led, delicately and precariously, to the present state of affairs, and how important it is not to disturb it.

Liberals place the golden age in the remote future. It has not come yet and will not come for a very long time — but it will come, if we march steadily toward it through incremental progress. Because it is so distant, there is no need to be impatient. A little reform here, a little tinkering there, a step forward at a time. Liberal histories of America tend to show how all of American history constitutes a slow, step-by-step accretion of individual liberty and dignity, a gradual

movement toward equality — from Jackson to Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt to FDR and beyond. We are getting there slowly but surely, and we should not rush it or jeopardize it.

Radicalism places the golden age in the future as well, but not the distant future — the very near future. The golden age can arrive if we take a few decisive actions, and we can take them now. We need not be moderate like the liberals. We could have the kingdom of heaven on earth almost immediately. All that is required is to overthrow the state, nationalize the means of production, dismantle compulsory heterosexism, or whatever the particular program may be. It is the very closeness of this perfect golden age that justifies radical action. Because it is almost upon us, great transformative acts are not only permissible but required.

The fourth ideology White calls **anarchism** — and the figures he has in mind are what most of us would call reactionaries, people who place the golden age in the remote past. It has come and gone. Things are not as they used to be. Once upon a time people were genuinely free; now we labor under a legacy of technology, mechanization, and the suppression of authentic human expression. Nietzsche, for instance, pined for the days of the Homeric warriors — people who did not overthink things, who were warlike, who loved fiercely and hated fiercely, and who lived with a genuine intensity of feeling since utterly lost. An anarchist history therefore charts a history of declension — how things have gotten progressively worse. Foucault offers a post-structuralist example: his histories of penology and madness argue that things were, in certain respects, better before modern disciplinary institutions took hold. Rather than confining people to prisons subject to constant surveillance — a kind of hyper-totalitarianism in which inmates are watched at every moment — it was in some sense more humane simply to punish people publicly and be done with it. Rather than confining people in

mental institutions and attempting to cure them, the older practice of tolerating the village idiot was kinder in its way. Things have gotten worse; society has become more cruel over time; liberalism is, in fact, a growing fascism.

Of the four ideologies, really only liberalism and radicalism claim to be scientific and rational — that is what they have in common. Conservatism and anarchism each claim to be realistic — grounded in either common sense, in the conservative case, or in some primal connection to blood and instinct, in the anarchist case — but neither claims to have science on its side. Importantly, these ideologies need not be explicitly stated to be operative in a historical work. They can be inferred from the tone or mood of the text itself. A work on the development of medical technologies that strikes a persistently negative and anxious note probably has an anarchist mood underneath it — the author likely feels that medicine has turned out to be a system of social control that limits individual freedom or undermines the human spirit.

Historical Styles and Elective Affinities

An historical style is a particular combination of the three modes described above: the mode of emplotment, the mode of argument, and the mode of ideological implication. White's argument is that not all combinations are equally available — there are certain elective affinities between modes, and he produces a table of these affinities in the introduction.

He argues there is a fundamental affinity between a romantic mode of emplotment, a formist mode of argument, and an anarchist ideological implication. A history of the spirit of the medieval period can be romantic — it shows that age as one in which good triumphed over evil, in which the knight stood as protector of society and people knew where they stood. It is formist in showing that this

was a unique spectacle produced by no discoverable general law. And it is anarchistic in that it pines for that long-lost golden age.

Similarly, a tragic mode of emplotment — from which we learn the laws at work in history — fits naturally with a mechanistic mode of argument, since mechanism is precisely what exhibits those laws, and the ideological implication tends to be radical. The clearest example is Marxism: history is in many ways tragic; from it we learn the laws governing the forces of production; the mechanism at work reduces bourgeois revolutions to precisely that — bourgeois revolutions driven by the need to remove social relations that have become fetters on the growth of productive forces — and the implication is radical. Now that we understand the mechanism, one or two fundamental changes can end the problem of scarcity.

A comic mode of emplotment, with its temporary reconciliations, fits naturally with an organicist mode of argument, since those reconciliations are part of a larger synthetic whole. The ideological implication tends to be conservative, because the organic whole and its reconciliations are the substance of where we are now — the actual society within which we live.

These stylistic affinities emerge in a particular work not so much as the result of a deliberate strategy on the part of the historian, but rather as a pre-cognitive, indeed poetic act. Before the historian can even begin to think about the historical field, he must prefigure it in his imagination — he must find some large-scale organizing principle under which he conceives it. This is what White calls the preconceptual linguistic protocol, and his argument is that it is not even something the historian is consciously aware of doing. It is not primarily the result of the historian's deliberate thinking but of the language he inherits — a language characterized by four different tropes, four different ways of orienting oneself toward reality, of which different historians draw on different ones most heavily.

The Four Tropes

Not surprisingly, White identifies exactly four tropes.

The first is **metaphor** — a kind of implicit analogy in which the properties of one thing are transferred to another. "My love is a rose" transfers to the beloved the qualities of sweetness and fragrance, of delicacy, perhaps of a certain thorniness. Metaphorical thinking is figurative and transfers features from one element to another, and it gives rise to the formist explanatory scheme, in which things are analyzed in terms of their unique, transferable properties.

The second trope is **metonymy** — literally, name change — in which the name of a part is substituted for the name of the whole. "Fifty sail entered Boston Harbor" means fifty ships: the sail stands for the ship. Metonymic analysis is reductive. We reduce fifty ships to what we consider their most important element, the element that makes them what they essentially are. Metonymy accordingly gives rise to mechanistic explanation.

The third trope is **synecdoche**, in which a part symbolizes the quality of the whole. We encounter a warm, sentimental person and say "he is all heart." We encounter a cold, analytical person and say "he is all brain." In synecdoche, the part stands for the whole not reductively but symbolically — it integrates all the parts under the principle of heart or of head. This of course gives rise to the integrative, synthetic mode of thinking found in idealism and organicism.

The fourth trope is **irony**. Irony negates on the figurative level what it literally affirms — it is language turning on itself and biting its own tail. "He was filled with a cold passion." "Blind mouths hungrily feeding on nothing." These are ironic expressions. Irony is the only trans-ideological trope, because it undermines all naive formulations and suggests that all language is figurative and therefore in some sense inaccurate and untrue. It is hospitable to both the contextualist mode of argument and the satirical mode of emplotment, because

both are already skeptical about the availability of any final or stable meaning. As it will turn out, White's own historical work is ironic — which is, in his view, the most sophisticated and self-aware mode of historical understanding available to us.

Post-structuralism as Linguistic Idealism

In conclusion, I want to situate White and the post-structural movement within a broader tradition of historical understanding. In many ways, post-structuralism is the most sophisticated and ironic form of idealism — idealism that has passed through the linguistic turn which transformed philosophy in the twentieth century.

Consider how traditional idealisms work. They claim that between the world and the human mind stands a representational medium — originally the spirit or the mind, which has ideas. These ideas or concepts never actually mirror the world; they constitute it. The world changes as mind develops. That is why it is called idealism: it is not a copy theory. Mind constitutes the world, and spirit is the fundamental entity of reality.

Post-structuralism makes a thoroughly analogous move. It dispenses with mind — given the development of neurology, appeals to spirit or mind have come to sound rather hokey — and replaces it with language. Instead of mind or spirit with its ideas and concepts, we have language with its signifiers. Language is viewed, in an ironic way, as representational and yet as failing to accurately represent, and therefore as constituting reality rather than copying it. Language, like mind in idealism, is an opaque medium of representation that constitutes its field of reference rather than reflecting it.

Not surprisingly, then, post-structuralists write histories in ways very similar to idealists. And if one is going to be an historian, it is in some ways the most enjoyable approach available. Basically, do not waste

your time in archives. Pick up three or four canonical texts. If you are an idealist, celebrate their greatness and extract the meaning within them. If you are a post-structuralist, critique their oppressiveness while celebrating their complexity, and analyze the play of signifiers within them. In fact, one of the great appeals of post-structuralism has been precisely that it has justified a return to canonical texts — even if only to debunk them.

Lecture 15: Naturalism Revisited — William McNeill's *Plagues and Peoples*

Introduction: McNeill and the Naturalist Tradition

With William McNeill, we return to one of the modes of historical interpretation we have examined previously — naturalism, a twentieth-century inheritor of the materialism of the Enlightenment. In particular, we are going to examine one book, a remarkable work by Professor McNeill called *Plagues and Peoples*, published in 1976. It is a wonderful example of what characterizes most of his texts: a work of the broadest possible scope and scale. McNeill is precisely one of those scholars whom Braudel would have recognized as a historian of the *longue durée*. He has written a history of all civilizations, a book on Arnold Toynbee — someone he finds genuinely interesting — and his most famous work, *The Rise of the West*. *Plagues and Peoples*, which in many ways is a path-breaking text and is just beginning to generate a series of spin-off studies, is a biological and environmental study of the human species, specifically focused around epidemiological questions. It might best be described as an epidemiological analysis of human history, spanning the entire range from the emergence of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon man right up to the present.

The significance of the work is partly, of course, that it demonstrates the profound influence microorganisms have had on the course of human history, behavior, culture, and institutions. But for our purposes, what is most important is that the entire analysis employs an exclusively naturalistic mode of argument. There is never any recourse to spirit, to idea, to mind, or to language as an opaque medium of representation. Humans are treated as part of an ecological niche, seen as part of a biological continuum of entities. It

is that naturalistic analytical approach which will be our primary interest here.

What we find in McNeill is that all societies — from the most primitive Paleolithic and Neolithic stages all the way up to twentieth-century industrial and technological communities — are placed in ecological niches and understood as existing within a continuum of entities ranging from large-scale food supplies to small-scale diseases. All cultural phenomena within such societies are treated instrumentally, not as expressions of the spirit of a people, but as particular strategies that a given group of the species has deployed to cope with its environment and gain some edge in its struggle for existence.

The Ecological Niche, the Food Chain, and Parasitism

The first key concept McNeill introduces is the notion that all life exists within a biological continuum and must find an ecological niche — that is, must find its place within the food chain. All animals and plants must locate themselves within this continuum. Some plants extract nutrients from the soil; certain large sea mammals feed on tiny organisms like plankton. But the fundamental biological relationship that McNeill identifies as organizing the food chain is that of parasitism. A parasite is an organism that lives off another organism. Since all non-vegetable animal species require their nutrients from other living organisms, that relationship is best understood as parasitic in character: we extract from plants and other large mammals the energy and nutrients we need to sustain ourselves.

Human life, since we too have a place in the food chain, is balanced between what McNeill calls micro-parasitism and macro-parasitism. Micro-parasitism refers to the tiny infectious organisms that are parasites on us. At this very moment, each and every one of us is

hosting an extraordinary number of micro-organisms living within our digestive systems. Much of what we eat goes not so much to sustain our own body as to sustain the various small organisms for which we serve as host. When we contract an infectious disease, we are in effect being consumed by a microparasite that is taking so much out of us that it produces a fever as our bodies attempt to fight and kill it.

Macro-parasitism, by contrast, refers to large-scale entities that live off us as a food supply or host. A tiger that eats a human being is a macroparasite. After roughly the age of the great hunt — somewhere between 100,000 and 500,000 BC — when humans engaged in the mass hunting of large game and drove to extinction the woolly mammoth and many other species of enormous animals throughout the world, the most prevalent and efficacious macroparasites preying on humans would be other humans. In prehistory, the most immediate form of this macro-parasitism was cannibalism: food and energy were obtained simply by killing and eating members of another tribe. Significantly, the preferred organ meat was brain, because it is the highest in protein. We find, for instance, that the early specimens of Peking Man at Zhoukoudian in China are invariably surrounded by skulls split in half — the top of the skull plate removed, making it serviceable as a vessel for the contents within.

Once we break through to history and find civilized communities, macro-parasitism takes the form of class exploitation. The vast bulk of people in the later stages of prehistory, particularly from around 12,000 BC onward with the Neolithic breakthrough, are agriculturalists — peasants. New groups emerge, including priests, kings, aristocrats, and nobles, who function as parasites, regularly consuming and extracting from the peasant population a portion of its grain, food, and labor. The parasite-host relationship must,

however, remain within a certain stable range. If the parasite extracts too much, it endangers the host. When a disease reaches the point of killing off the people it infects, it will quickly die off itself because it will have nothing left to consume. Similarly, if macro-parasitic elites exploit their peasant populations to the point of destroying village life and eliminating the conditions necessary for peasant survival, they destroy themselves, since the elites do not know how to grow food. Kill the host, and you kill yourself.

When this equilibrium is maintained, the parasitic relationship is described as endemic — a fairly stable and, in some measure, mutually tolerable arrangement. When the equilibrium is breached, and the parasite begins to grow out of control and endanger more and more potential hosts, we call it epidemic.

Language and the Emergence of the Human as Ultimate Predator

With regard to our species considered as a whole, the fundamental breakthrough was the development of language — not as an expression of the human mind and sensibility, but as a straightforward means of communication, enabling us to divide labor and coordinate our tasks. That great cooperative hunt required the development of language: the ability to say "you drive that boar around the tree while I wait on the other side with a spear, and we will encircle it." Such communication meant that a physically frail and relatively unarmed animal — which is what humans genuinely are, equipped with neither formidable jaws nor natural weapons — could, through cooperation, kill the largest animals in the world. Even early Paleolithic hunters figured out through a division of labor how to bring down elephants: by exciting them and leading them on a chase into a swamp, where the animals became stuck, unable to escape, and could be pelted with spears and stones until they died. American Indians, before they had the horse, killed buffalo by stampeding them off cliff edges.

It is the development of language as a medium of cooperation and communication that allowed humans to become the ultimate predator on the planet and, with respect to the rest of the biological continuum, the most effective parasite of all. It is precisely at that moment that there arose the possibility of humans becoming not merely an endemic parasite but an epidemic one — a species that might, as some ecologists fear today, ultimately kill off the host.

The Neolithic Breakthrough and the Curtailment of the Biological Continuum

The breakthrough to history occurred around 12,000 BC with the domestication of plants and animals in what is called the Neolithic stage of development — the New Stone Age — in which human communities first began settling in villages and cultivating basic grains. In biological terms, however, what this process does is dramatically curtail the vast variety of species that had previously existed. Consider what it means to grow grain: first, one plows the fields, killing off the vast bulk of plant species previously present; then one plants; then one weeds, eliminating everything that is not the intended food source. In Neolithic agriculture, all forms of life that do not belong to the food crop are systematically killed off. From the very beginning, then, the development of Neolithic civilization means a dramatic curtailment of the biological continuum. When people today argue that modern humanity is killing off species and threatening them with extinction, we need to remember that this is what we have done from the beginning. It is, in a fundamental sense, what civilization is: the progressive elimination of species that interfere with the food supply we wish to privilege.

When American Indians in the eastern woodlands hunted deer, they would regularly, every three seasons or so, burn the forest entirely. The only things that survived were massive trees, leaving behind a great parkland. That is how they were able to hunt deer effectively — by clearing out the undergrowth, the vegetation, and the small

animals that competed with or obscured the deer. The point is that there is nothing distinctively modern about our destruction of biological diversity; it is intrinsic to the civilizing process as such.

Civilization in Temperate Zones and the Management of Disease Pools

Civilized communities emerge after the Neolithic stage in particular temperature zones — specifically the temperate zones — and the reason is epidemiological rather than cultural. Temperate zones are cooler and drier, and as a result support a far smaller range of life forms. Because there are fewer life forms, there are fewer parasites living within us. In temperate zones, people have longer life expectancies and more energy, because a greater proportion of the food they consume goes toward their own energy systems rather than toward feeding internal parasites. This is why we find no great civilizations originating in the tropics. It is not that the tropical heat makes people tired and lazy, as used to be believed; it is rather that the biological richness of tropical environments produces a vast array of organisms that live off human bodies, and it is that which produces exhaustion.

As civilized communities develop, they can be thought of as progressively shortening the food chain — privileging precisely those elements of the food chain that they stand in a parasitic or symbiotic relationship toward, and eliminating the others. This process also has an important epidemiological consequence: it eliminates diseases that cannot live off barnyard animals or the hydraulic infrastructure of irrigation systems. A whole range of diseases lives off wolves, coyotes, and other animals that compete with domesticated livestock. When such animals are killed off, the diseases that live on them are killed off too, and the disease pool is restricted to precisely those diseases that can live off cattle, pigs, and sheep, or off the flooded rice paddies and irrigation works of early civilizations in

Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Yellow River Valley. The most famous of the resulting diseases, of course, is malaria.

Macro-Parasitism, Population Growth, and Its Mechanisms of Equilibrium

The nomadic warriors who conquered the first civilized communities established themselves as the first stable ruling elites and therefore as the first stable macro-parasites over their vanquished populations. Cannibalism, it should be noted, is not a stable form of macro-parasitism: eventually you consume all available hosts and the food supply runs out. A stable parasitic relationship requires that the parasite extract only so much from the host that the host survives and reproduces.

As long as the macro-parasitic elite takes less than what is needed for population growth, the peasant population will actually grow, producing an even larger surplus of food in turn. But as populations grow, they must eventually reach an equilibrium with their environment, and they do so through three mechanisms, all of which carry an element of parasitism. The first is disease: as population density increases, a community becomes an increasingly attractive target for any microorganism that encounters it. The more dense a host population, the greater the likelihood that diseases will emerge to bring it back into equilibrium by killing off a portion of the growth. The second mechanism is war: as populations grow, nomadic warriors perceive the wealth of settled societies and are tempted to conquer; simultaneously, the growing settled society faces its own population pressure against a fixed land supply and is impelled to expand. Both tendencies lead to warfare — a form of macro-parasitism. The third mechanism is famine: when our relationship to the soil becomes so epidemic that we begin destroying its nutritive capacity, we will eventually produce famines that relieve population pressure through starvation and increased vulnerability to disease.

Naturally, all three mechanisms interrelate: periods of famine are likely to produce nomadic movement, which produces war.

Childhood Diseases as Endemic Adaptation

The density of populations in cities — and civilization is precisely what produces cities — allows for the creation of a particular endemic pattern of disease infection known as the childhood disease. If a disease moves through a population in epidemic fashion every twenty-five to thirty years, as influenza does, it strikes all members of the society and kills off a certain percentage. If, however, the population is dense enough that the disease can move continuously from person to person without ever actually leaving the community, it becomes endemic — and because it is constantly present, it infects all children. A percentage of them die, but those who survive develop immunity.

If we are going to be infected by parasites — and we are — childhood diseases are the preferable form. A four-year-old who dies represents a relatively small investment of communal resources; by contrast, the loss of someone who has reached adulthood, accumulated years of training and skills, and is ready to contribute as a warrior, farmer, or craftsperson represents a far more serious communal loss.

The other side of this, however, is that before the development of epidemiology, childhood diseases served as unconscious biological weapons. Those of us who have passed through such diseases carry them within us and are immune to them. If we encounter someone who has never been exposed, we are, in effect, a biological weapon — and the outcome of that encounter is near-certain death for the unexposed individual. This fact will become of enormous importance at certain moments in history.

Many social and cultural taboos that have emerged across different civilizations are, in White's analysis, actually the product of epidemiological insight encoded in religious law. The caste structure of India, for instance, McNeill argues fundamentally separates two distinct populations: the Indo-Aryans who conquered the subcontinent and the original Dravidians who were pushed into the Deccan, the southern part of India. Those Deccan populations live in a tropical zone and carry a distinct range of microparasitic diseases that are fatal to Indo-Aryans. The caste structure, which literally prohibits physical contact between castes, and requires that any Indo-Aryan who touches an "untouchable" undergo elaborate ritual purification — including immersion in water — is in epidemiological terms a mechanism of disease prevention. The religious meaning attached to the ritual is secondary to its biological function. Similarly, the Islamic rule about which hand one uses for eating most likely originates in the practical need, in the absence of modern sanitation, to prevent contaminating food with organisms from the digestive tract. Kosher dietary laws prohibiting the consumption of pork may have originated in the very real danger of trichinosis when pork is insufficiently cooked, as it often was before the development of enclosed ovens.

The Confluence of Civilized Disease Pools

By roughly the first century BC, four distinct disease pools had emerged corresponding to the four major civilization centers, each of which had evolved into a stable biological niche with its own particular microparasites: the Middle East and Mesopotamia; the Mediterranean basin of Greece and Rome; the Indian subcontinent, particularly the Ganges and Indus River valleys; and what McNeill calls the Sinic civilization of China. Around 100 AD, there is finally a breakthrough in trade and exchange connecting all four of these zones. The result is that these distinct disease pools are unified:

diseases are swapped back and forth across civilizational boundaries, and initially the outcome is a dramatic die-off as populations encounter pathogens to which they have no immunity.

In the Mediterranean basin — the source of Hellenic culture, which would become the foundation of Western civilization — the population continues to decline from 100 AD for at least another five hundred years. Population is actually shrinking each century. This is important context for understanding the overall arc of human history: the sustained population growth of the last few centuries is, in fact, a freak occurrence. For most of human history, populations stabilized or shrank.

The Decline of Rome: A Naturalistic Explanation

This epidemiological context offers a naturalistic alternative to the more familiar cultural explanations of Rome's decline — the argument, associated with Gibbon among others, that the Romans became decadent and ceased to be hardy. McNeill suggests the decline had much more to do with this sustained disease die-off rate. As the population shrank, the Roman state needed the same revenue to maintain its roads, its armies, and its public works, but had fewer people from whom to extract it. It therefore increased per capita taxation — which is to say, it increased the intensity of macro-parasitism — at precisely the moment when new diseases were increasing the intensity of micro-parasitism. Peasants found themselves squeezed from both sides simultaneously. The result was not a change in the spirit of Rome but rather a simple and catastrophic lack of energy: not enough energy to keep the universities going, not enough to sustain the army against Germanic invaders, not enough to maintain high cultural output. Things like bread and circuses might be understood in this context not as causes of decline but as expressions of the fatalism produced by this intense dual parasitic pressure.

The Mediterranean basin began to emerge from that long die-off around the middle of the sixth century AD — when bubonic plague arrived, from roughly 542 to 750 AD — and it arrived with devastating force. The absolute disintegration of the Western Roman Empire followed, with only the eastern empire, centered on Constantinople, surviving as the Byzantine continuation of Rome. For the Italian peninsula, the result was a shift in the locus of European population away from the Mediterranean and toward northern Europe. Those areas of northern Europe, protected after approximately 950 AD from the macro-parasitic raids of Vikings and Scandinavians by the emergence of a knightly warrior caste, became the new center of European population. The move north was not, as Hegelian idealism might suggest, the result of the world spirit migrating from south to north and east to west; it was the result of Italy being overrun by plague, the consequent dramatic fall in human population density, and the resulting rise in the ratio of cattle to people, which in turn produced a devastating scourge of malaria throughout southern Italy.

Christianity as an Epidemiological Advantage

After the plague period, European civilization carried an enormous advantage over every other civilization in the world — and that advantage was Christianity. Not because Christianity teaches the brotherhood of man or provides access to God, but because it is the only major religion that teaches, as a positive religious duty, the care of the sick. Islam preaches a fatalism regarding illness: what happens to the sick is the will of Allah, and one leaves the afflicted by the wayside. Only Christianity commands that when someone falls sick, it is one's duty to stand by their side and help them — something most people are understandably reluctant to do, since doing so exposes the caregiver to contagion. But it turns out that simple acts of care — giving a person soup, covering them with a blanket, speaking to

them reassuringly — make not merely a marginal but a profound difference between survival and death in diseases like bubonic plague. Simple human care increases a patient's sense of well-being, which in turn exerts a powerful effect on the immunological system. Even interventions that do not work medically, like bloodletting, produced better outcomes than abandonment, precisely because the patient who believes someone is caring for them has a stronger will to survive and a more responsive immune system.

The Mongol Empire and the Black Death

The next great scourge of disease to strike Europe and the entire world was brought on by the rise of the Mongol Empire. The Mongols were the most formidable barbarian warriors the world had ever produced and created a global empire of unprecedented extent, stretching from the eastern tip of Asia across the Eurasian steppe to the borders of what is now Central Europe. The Mongols not only waged war; they also facilitated caravan trade across vast expanses of territory, since once those expanses were unified under the various Khanates, merchants could pass through many former border zones without paying prohibitive fees. The incidental result was the transmission of plague along those trade routes. In the Eurasian steppe, a vast underground population of burrowing rodents carried plague. The Mongols brought plague from the Middle East and infected that underground rodent population, establishing it as a massive reservoir of bubonic plague. From there, bubonic plague was eventually unleashed across the Eurasian steppe into Europe, arriving in northern Europe by around 1346. The population die-off was at least 25%, and in some places as high as 40% of the European population — a devastation without parallel.

This epidemic density of parasitism, however, induced several important innovations in the West that no other civilization developed in the same form, precisely because their experience of

plague, while serious, was less acutely epidemic than in the West. In Italy, the art of quarantine was developed: understanding that plague could be transmitted pneumatically once someone had contracted it, Italian city-states developed the practice of isolating the infected so they could not breathe on others — a massive innovation that would later give the West a critical advantage in managing infectious disease. A second and far less positive innovation was the development of the pogrom: communities identified the plague with conspiracies by specific groups, most commonly Jews, and burned Jewish villages in response. A third and more complex consequence was the rise of mystical religious movements. Before the bubonic plague, the dominant intellectual expression of scholastic Catholicism was the rationalistic synthesis of Thomas Aquinas, integrating Christianity with Aristotelian philosophy. But when one witnesses a person contract bubonic plague and die within twenty-four hours — literally withering, graying, and shriveling before one's eyes — any belief in a rational and benevolent order of the universe becomes extremely difficult to sustain. The result was the growth of mystical religious movements emphasizing a direct personal relationship with God, movements that had previously been marginal. Protestantism, in this reading, may be one of the long-term consequences of bubonic plague. Finally, a lifestyle change that accompanied the plague was a resurgence of hedonism: eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" captures this phenomenon literarily, and there were historical instances of villages infected by plague instituting prolonged Saturnalian revelries when they believed themselves doomed.

The plague also produced important structural changes in property law and social freedom. Prior to the Black Death, most Neolithic farmers — and the vast majority of peasants in that era and beyond were still effectively at the Neolithic stage — existed in a condition of

serfdom, a form of quasi-slavery. The reason was demographic: there was a shortage of land and an excess of people, and the best arrangement most farmers could obtain was to promise their labor and service in exchange for the right to work someone else's land. After the plague, this relationship was reversed: there was now an excess of land and a desperate shortage of people. Farmers turned to their lords and renegotiated the terms of their relationship, refusing the old arrangements and demanding instead a fixed rent in exchange for their labor, along with freedom from personal domination — including, specifically, the decline of the *droit du seigneur*. This produced the emergence of a new conception of property: personal, proprietary ownership as opposed to the feudal suzerainty model. The emergence of this new property regime, in turn, laid the foundations for capitalism.

Europe was eventually released from the grip of bubonic plague not through the Pied Piper of legend but through two rather mundane ecological developments. The first was a shortage of wood throughout northern Europe, the result of extensive deforestation to clear agricultural fields. This shortage made wooden construction too expensive, and builders shifted to stone with slate roofing. This architectural change had a crucial epidemiological consequence: plague had been carried in fleas living on the black rat, an excellent climber that lived comfortably in wooden walls and thatched roofs. When the rat died, the infected flea fell onto whoever was below. Stone walls and slate roofs could not be scaled by the black rat, which was consequently displaced to the fields. The second development was the arrival in Europe of the Norwegian brown rat, a much larger animal that does not carry the same flea species as the black rat and is too heavy and unwieldy to climb into thatched roofs. As the Norwegian rat displaced the black rat from human habitations, bubonic plague declined markedly throughout most of Europe.

European Colonization and Virgin Soil Epidemics

The European colonization of the New World was not facilitated, in any fundamental sense, by superior military technology. Hernán Cortés could have been equipped with machine guns, but with only five hundred men against millions of Mexicans, weapons alone would not have been decisive. The great Aztec and Inca empires were roughly comparable in organizational capacity to contemporary European states and were quite capable of defending themselves militarily. What destroyed them was biological warfare, entirely unwitting on both sides. Within fifty years of contact, roughly ninety percent of the populations of North and South America were destroyed by what epidemiologists call virgin soil epidemics: epidemic diseases striking a population with no prior exposure whatsoever.

Such epidemics have a characteristically devastating pattern. With no acquired immunity, the disease kills primarily adults between the ages of roughly eighteen and thirty-five — precisely those individuals who are the chief warriors, the chief agricultural producers, the people upon whom the entire social order depends. When they die off, the society collapses into chaos and grief. Moreover, in the eastern woodlands of North America, where tribes were not organized into larger unified structures, the decimation of one tribe's warriors was immediately perceived by neighboring tribes as an opportunity: if my enemies have lost seventy percent of their fighting strength, now is the time to destroy the remainder and take their land. This dynamic further accelerated the collapse of indigenous societies already reeling from epidemic disease.

Add to this the effect on indigenous religious and cultural systems. When five hundred light-skinned strangers arrive, claiming to come in the name of their God, and the entire native population is dying of diseases they have never encountered — while not a single one of

the newcomers appears even mildly ill — the implications are theologically overwhelming. Native religious systems, unable to account for this catastrophe, collapsed, and mass conversion to Christianity followed. This interpretive framework was entirely symmetrical: when the Puritan settlers of New England learned that a large smallpox epidemic had already killed off the majority of the local Indian population before their arrival, they saw it straightforwardly as a sign that they were God's chosen people in the new Israel, and that God had cleared the wilderness for their habitation.

The European macro-parasites, having exterminated the population that was to serve as their host, found themselves in need of a replacement labor force. They found it in the densest disease pools in the world: the tropical regions of Africa. Africans had developed immunity to an extraordinary range of diseases — including certain forms of malaria, smallpox, and yellow fever — by virtue of having co-existed with them for millennia. Transported to the New World as enslaved people, they replaced the destroyed native populations as the host for European macro-parasitism. They also brought with them yellow fever and malaria, diseases previously unknown in the New World, which further devastated any remaining native populations they encountered.

Medical Science and the Disruption of Equilibrium

What fundamentally altered the global balance of human populations was the breakthrough to medical science around the seventeenth century. Since that point, the West has been able to stay one step ahead of mutations in the microorganic world. Each time a microorganism mutates to overcome a vaccine or antibiotic, scientists have thus far been able to develop a new response before the resulting disease achieves epidemic scale. This has, for the first time in human history, allowed for sustained, continuous population

growth — a condition that is, from the perspective of most of human history, a profound anomaly. Medical science also enabled, for the first time, the entry into extremely steep disease gradients. Europeans had never successfully colonized tropical Africa, not because Africans were formidable warriors — though many were — but simply because the disease environment was so debilitating to Europeans lacking immunity to tropical pathogens. Once quinine and other vaccines became available, European colonizers could enter and dominate tropical zones that had been epidemiologically impregnable for all of prior history.

Western medicine has since been extended to populations throughout the entire world, and the result has been a global population explosion that has pushed our species out of equilibrium with its environment. We have ceased to function as an endemic parasite on the planet's ecosystems and have become, in effect, an epidemic parasite — one that, as many ecologists argue, risks eventually destroying the host.

McNeill himself is not entirely pessimistic. He notes that there have always been mechanisms through which populations return to equilibrium, and there is no reason to assume they will not eventually reassert themselves. Three mechanisms historically produce such equilibriums. Disease, first: we have so far managed to stay ahead of microbial mutation, but there is no guarantee that this will always be the case. AIDS, at the time McNeill was writing, appeared to represent a disease that was genuinely ahead of our medical capacities, and it may be a harbinger of others. Famine, second: as population densities increase, we risk destroying the fertility of agricultural land, producing large-scale famine events of the kind already being witnessed in parts of Africa through processes of desertification. And war, third: when disease and famine are insufficient to bring population growth back into balance, war has

historically served as the last mechanism of equilibrium — a possibility that cannot be excluded from projections about our future.

Extensions of McNeill's Argument

McNeill's primary concern is with epidemiology and the dynamics of equilibrium within the food chain. His naturalistic framework can, however, be extended in two directions that further enrich a naturalistic understanding of the past.

The first extension is to add to the relation of parasitism the complementary biological relation of symbiosis, in which two organisms each provide the other with a genuine edge in survival. Not all relationships between elites and peasant populations need be understood as purely parasitic. Consider the technological priests of the early hydraulic river civilizations — the specialists who understood flooding cycles, knew how to build and maintain irrigation works, and could communicate this knowledge across generations. Such individuals were not necessarily parasites on their populations; they may have stood in a symbiotic relationship to them, receiving food from the peasants while enabling those same peasants to grow far more food than they ever could have without that expertise. Modern science likely represents a similar symbiosis: scientists do not themselves produce food, but they have enabled farmers to produce quantities of food previously unimaginable. Warriors who protect a settled peasant population from nomadic raiders, though they themselves produce nothing, may likewise stand in a genuinely symbiotic rather than purely parasitic relationship with the communities that feed and house them.

The second extension draws on lines suggested by the work of Mircea Eliade. We know from McNeill that all of us exist in a precarious position in the food chain, and we know from Eliade's

analysis that this precariousness generates a certain fundamental terror in the human animal. What humans may require in response to this terror is some form of sedative or painkiller to numb them to the constant awareness of how fragile their existence really is. It is an interesting fact that there is no civilization or culture on record that does not use narcotics of some kind — whether alcohol, cannabis, or other substances. This universality suggests that the pharmacological impulse is not an aberration but a structural feature of the human condition.

Consider from this perspective what religious meaning, the meaning of history, and the concept of transcendence actually do at a functional level. They may serve the naturalistic purpose of a painkiller or sedative. When a child dies at three years old, innocent and beloved, a religious framework that places the child in the care of God in a heavenly afterlife may be precisely what allows the grieving parent to continue functioning rather than being destroyed by grief. In that case, the intellectual elites who produce religions, cosmologies, and systems of meaning are operating as something like cultural pharmacists — a comparison made quite literally by the historical vocabulary associated with such figures. They were called doctors of the soul, and the position they held was called a curacy, from the Latin *cura*, meaning care or cure. They were understood to cure the pain of the soul. In this sense, even those who produce meaning — apparently the most transcendental function of human culture — may in fact stand in a genuinely symbiotic relationship to their host society, providing the psychological reprieve that is necessary for the sustaining of human and social life.

Lecture 16: The Heterogeneity of Historical Understanding

The conclusion that I would like to reach and sum up about the course we have taken — the path we have trod, as it were — is threefold. First, I want to sum up some of the critical questions that we have raised: questions about the epistemological nature of history, questions about the status of historical knowledge, historical inquiry, and the sort of truth, if any, that history offers. Then I want to return to some of the substantive issues that I promised to address from the beginning and hope I have throughout. I want to argue there that there are fundamentally two visions or two modes of historical understanding, and I want to suggest what hangs on the choices one way or the other. Finally, I want to address some pragmatic issues — issues of the value of historical knowledge, what from either perspective or from any perspective history must mean for us, and why we must, to the extent that we must, come to terms with the human past.

Epistemological Questions

To begin with the epistemological and critical questions. It seems to me that recent developments in the philosophy of science have rendered the old question — the question that 19th-century Enlightenment figures struggled with about whether history was a science or not — obsolete. We now know that science is not, in fact, unified by one particular method. It is true that there is a formal mathematical method that underlies the techniques and explanations found in physics, to some extent in chemistry. But one does not find those same sorts of mathematical laws in botany, and yet no one denies that botany is a science. One does not find them

in geology — no one denies that geology is a science. One does not find them in many parts of biology; in some parts we do, in molecular biology, in microbiology, but we do not find them throughout biology, and anatomy does not have those sorts of laws. So the notion that there is exactly one and only one form of science is no longer held seriously by philosophers of science, and therefore the question of whether history fits such a singular, univocal sort of conceptual construction seems to me obsolete.

What we now believe about science — or at least what many philosophers have believed since the writings of Thomas Kuhn — is that science is a paradigmatic discipline, which is to say it works through the construction of models: models about how various physical processes work. What makes scientific progress possible is an agreement on those paradigms, on those models, and on the techniques that are demarcated within those models for solving the still-existing puzzles or riddles. In that sense, what characterizes science is being paradigmatic — having some shared conception of what the fundamental issues are, what the fundamental problems are, and what the fundamental acceptable ways of addressing and solving those problems are. To that extent, it is fair to say that history is, for the most part, a pre-paradigmatic discipline.

There are things that are close to paradigms for history. I would argue Weberian sociology is to some extent paradigmatic. Idealism is something like a paradigm — somewhere between a paradigm and a philosophy. And of course Marxism is about as close as one gets to a paradigm in the historical discipline. In fact, we have to acknowledge that history employs a wide variety of techniques and strategies of interpretation, analysis, and explanation. It is not the case that all histories are stories and narratives — we saw that with Braudel. Some histories are in fact sociological models. Some take the form not of stories but of a series of statistical tables. Some take the form of

genealogical graphs, family trees. Some are extended essays on the meaning of some particular phenomenon, which rarely use tensed sentences. Though most historians are storytellers, there is a variety of practices — explanatory as well as discursive — which characterize the historical discipline.

What we need to understand, then, is that there is no one historical method any more than there is one scientific method.

I do not want to suggest that there are no good questions of an epistemological nature. We can ask different questions which seem to me much more pointed and much more significant. Rather than ask whether history is a science, let us ask whether history can be relatively scientific, and make that judgment relative to other disciplines. Is history more or less scientific, say, than economics — classical economics, neoclassical economics? Is history more or less scientific than, say, anthropology or sociology? Is it more or less scientific than literary criticism? Placing it in that perspective gives us a sense of the extent to which history embodies the principles of a scientific discipline, and that has some importance for us.

The absolute question as to whether history is a science can always be begged by the counter-question of whether science is even a science. Is botany really a science? Is biology really a science? In fact, I would point out that by the old canons — the positivist canons of science as an absolute system — Karl Popper was led to conclude that evolutionary theory was not, in fact, scientific. It could not produce laws or mathematical formulas, was not empirically falsifiable, and was therefore a heuristic, poetic guide to a future science.

One question, then: whether history can be relatively scientific, and if so, relative to what other disciplines? A second question, which seems to me equally important and valuable and which admits of a variety of different responses, is whether some sorts of history are

more scientific than others. Is an idealist history more scientific than a formist history — than a history which just comments on and vividly describes the uniqueness of various events? Is there not more of a unification of explanatory scheme with principles and ideas, as opposed to simply noting how incredibly unique the American Revolution was, unlike anything else, and offering vivid descriptions of scenes at various town greens? Is a Weberian history more scientific than an idealist one — one which taxonomizes the possible relations among various sorts of authorities, individuals, institutions, and cultures? Is a Marxist history more scientific than a narrative history — one which begins with general principles and to some extent offers law-like interpretations of the past, one which, given certain initial conditions, allows one to deduce what should have happened in any given case? Clearly, Marxism is not a science, Weber is not a science, and idealism is not a science to the same extent that quantum physics is scientific. But are those sorts of disciplines more scientific than other sorts of historical practice? Is Marxism more scientific, is Weber more scientific, than straight narrative storytelling — than what White calls contextualism and formism?

Finally, there is a third critical and epistemological question that I think is rarely asked and yet has to be asked. Let us assume that certain of those disciplines are more scientific than other approaches to history. Do we even want a scientific history? Is that even desirable? Do we want a history which shows us law-like explanation, or do we come to history perhaps for something else — to understand the unique flavor that describes a particular sort of culture? When we want an explanation of American history, do we necessarily want a clear causal analysis that gives us the law-like nature of what must have caused and only could have caused the American Revolution? Or do we want, when we look at that, to know what makes us different as Americans? What is it about the Revolution that makes us proud, ashamed, or indifferent about our

past, present, and future? Is a history that produces laws one that is interesting? Do we want from history moral judgment?

Treating history naturalistically as a science, there is one basic principle: one does not moralize about nature. No one considers lions evil because they eat gazelles; lions eat gazelles because that is in their nature. Do we want a history like that? Do we want a history that does not allow us to moralize? Treating history as a science might preclude our moralization. Would we want a scientific description of the causes of the Second World War that reduces it simply to an imbalance of powers created by the failure of Britain to recognize the greatness of Germany and that failure of recognition in the Treaty of Versailles? That the First World War and the Second World War were really one world war with a brief break? Is that bearable for us? Is that why we go to history?

Or do we perhaps go to a history of the Second World War because we have to do something psychologically about the fact that roughly twelve million people were mass murdered and untold millions more died in a huge, dramatic struggle? Do we not in fact want to have an account that tells us, perhaps, that the cause of the Second World War was an absolutely maniacal madman and his insane lust for power?

Two scholars are worth pointing out here. A.J.P. Taylor wrote a book on the origins of the Second World War which is an attempt to be scientific. He argues that even if it had not been for Hitler — if the German government had been headed by a liberal or a socialist — we would have had the Second World War anyway. It was inevitable. It was a result of the fact that the First World War had not decisively resolved the problems of balance of power within Europe, and that Hitler, despite his mania and racism, acted as any other head of the German state would have. The structural situation dictated it. Alan Bullock found that frightening, because he wrote at a time not long

after the Second World War, when we did not necessarily want a scientific understanding. We come to history, as Nietzsche would say, with human needs. Our needs were not only explanation but somehow comprehension — which science does not necessarily offer in that way. We wanted a comprehension that created a moral order out of a chaotic set of events.

Those strike me as the more important critical issues that emerge for the modern mind in the late 20th century: whether history can be relatively scientific, whether some sorts of history are more scientific than others, and whether, in fact, a scientific history is even desirable in the first place, and if so, why.

Whatever the answer to any of these questions, it strikes me that to deny that history offers some sort of knowledge is not only counterintuitive — we all feel somehow that it does — but absurd. If history does not give us knowledge about the United States of America, what in heaven's name would? History obviously does give us some kind of knowledge. If history does not give us knowledge, then why, when people ask us why we dress the way we do, do we tell them about something in our past? Why do you live where you do? When we answer that, we say we were brought up there. Clearly, history must offer us some kind of knowledge.

The Two Modes of Historical Understanding

I now want to turn to the major fish I would like to fry, which are the two modes of historical understanding. It strikes me that historical analysis over the last few hundred years has generated essentially two different visions, two different interpretive strategies, and two different explanations. One is idealist, and the other is naturalist.

Each of these systems is internally consistent. Each accounts for all the phenomena that arise within it systematically, and each is coherent — neither contradicts itself at any point. It strikes me that

both of these have virtues — different virtues and different vices — and that they both respond to different human propensities and needs. Different things that we want out of history are answered by these different modes of interpretation. In fact, I would call these two modes what one philosopher has termed "essentially contestable concepts" — or, more precisely, essentially contestable modes of interpretation.

Both of them will account for the past, both are internally consistent, both generate virtues and vices, and the choice between them really is an existential choice. It is a moral choice. It is fundamentally a human choice, because which mode of analysis we will choose for the past will tell us more than anything else about how we think of ourselves as a species — about how we characterize ourselves as humans, as animals, as people, and as spiritual entities.

What I would like to do now is present to you the vision of each of these schools. I am going to try to do this internally, as I have in the past — giving you a period in which I will try to personify the virtues and wisdom of the idealist perspective and naturally be quite derogatory towards the naturalist, and then switch hats.

The Case for Idealism

What are the virtues of idealism? We idealists argue that history, humanity, and culture are somehow different from nature — that there is a difference between, say, Albert Einstein and a chimpanzee that knows how to type on a typewriter. That is the intuitively obvious point that we idealists cherish: that history, unlike natural science, discloses a different sort of life, a different metaphysical realm — the realm of freedom, of human dignity, of aspiration, and of progress. Nature is, by nature, static. It does not develop. And if it does develop, it develops by blind, dumb laws. Whereas history develops by a growth of awareness, of self-understanding, of rational

comprehension. Whether that be thought of in terms of spirit, or mind, or language, or culture, somehow the human species is different from everything else we find in the physical world. And that difference comes down to its development over time, and history is where that is exemplified.

For us idealists, we must recognize that history is the realm of freedom — whether that be thought of as liberty or as Kantian autonomy. History is the realm in which we find a counterexample to the buzzing confusion of one damn thing after another without any sense, rhyme, or reason. There is purpose in history. People do things with motives, with intentions, which cannot be said for microorganisms and other primates.

Culture, for we idealists — whether we think of it as mind or language — is more than just sounds. We can train a parrot to say "to know the good is to do the good," but does that mean anything to the parrot? Whereas when Socrates said "to know the good is to do the good," it meant something significant. It meant that we could improve human society simply by expanding human knowledge — that motivation was not a problem, that people always did what they thought was right, and that when they did wrong things, it was because they had a bad education and bad training, that their character was a function of their background. When the parrot says "to know the good is to do the good," I do not believe it can have that in mind. I do not believe it has a mind. That is the difference. History discloses the realm of culture, not nature.

It is a distinct pattern of evolution, a distinct pattern of explanation, and a distinct pattern of understanding — a pattern not shared by the physicist. It is precisely because culture does not mirror the world but constitutes it. If we believe that there are ghosts out in the outer office or in your closet, in a sense there are: they are part of the mental framework of your life, and you will live your life as if they

were there. That makes a huge difference in your world. To believe that there are humors in your body is not a copy of the world; it is an interpretation of it. It will lead to different strategies, but it will also lead to different cognitive states, to a different feeling about the world than if we believe illness is the result of infections.

This is particularly true of ideas and cultures that refer to the human mind itself — these are essentially constitutive. If we believe we are free, free to choose, free to think what we will, then we are free. When we believe that we have no choices, that is the moment we surrender our freedom. This is why idealism is more than just an interpretive strategy — it is a strategy with a difference. It makes a difference to us in our lives. The belief in idealism creates the very freedom which it itself projects.

History, then, is a development according to the evolutionary dictates of this medium, of this culture, and of its posits and notions. The difference, from a naturalist's perspective, between Shakespeare and a caveman is just his clothing. But to an idealist, although they may have the same physiognomy, the difference between a Cro-Magnon and Shakespeare is every bit as great as the difference between the first *Australopithecus afarensis* and that Cro-Magnon. Culture is a realm of evolution which increases dramatically and far more profoundly than physiological evolution ever could have.

Insofar as this development is purely human, idealism expresses the belief that our changes come from ourselves — and this is the essence of freedom. We have not developed because of some external force but because of our own internal development, and for that reason, whatever changes have occurred are the result of our own doing. That is the ultimate source of human dignity. Our technological mastery over nature is not a gift, not the result of some external impinging; it is the expression of human genius through science and applied science. And if that is not a source of human

dignity, then nothing is. Our belief in universal freedom, our belief in the extension of civil rights and civic participation to ethnic minorities, to women, and to various other economically disadvantaged groups, is not a result of certain causal forces working on us. It is an expansion of the human spirit, of the human mind.

Thus, idealism treats history not as a subspecies of the development of geological time, but as something profoundly — probably uniquely — meaningful. Nothing has more meaning for we idealists than history itself. History discloses where we are; history discloses the purposes, the ends, the ideas, the principles, the trends towards which human development has been headed. Idealism shows — and there are varieties — perhaps the growth of human freedom over time, the growth of human rationality, the growth of human community, the expansion of an awareness of our place in the cosmos, perhaps an expansion of our awareness of God and his plans for us.

For we idealists, history never follows laws. It develops in a teleological fashion, according to ends, according to principles, and according to purposes — which are in fact the deep structure of human culture, mentality, and mind. Whether that be freedom, whether that be artistic self-representation, whether that be self-awareness, some such principles certainly must lie behind history. Otherwise, it is simply one damn thing after another, and we have to agree with Henry Ford: it is just bunk. Only idealism holds out the promise of progress — the idea that there is a trajectory along which human movement has come and towards which it is headed. That trajectory is what we mean by progress. We start with a baseline; we have added to it through our growth. Insofar as it teaches us of progress and the possibility of progress, it teaches us that hope may be a virtue after all — that the belief in a better tomorrow may in fact be not only a psychological salve but an inducement to greater

achievement, that hope and optimism may be the highest expression not only of the human spirit but of human potentiality, that it may be what causes us to achieve great things, if great things are to be achieved.

In fact, I do not think we can deny that idealist understandings of history have inspired many of the most heroic and admirable acts of our species in recent times. It was the belief in human progress and an idealist conception of history — which the transcendentalists drew directly from Hegel, Herder, and Kant — that inspired the abolitionist movement in the United States. It was a belief in the cult of progressive idealist history that inspired people like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Wollstonecraft to demand that the freedom of man be extended to woman. It was the belief in the idealist interpretation of history as the working out of the teleological project of a comity of nations which led people like Woodrow Wilson to insist that we would fight one more war to end all wars. It may not have succeeded, but few things have been as admirable in human history, and few things have inspired us as greatly. It was an idealist understanding of the course of human history that led people like Martin Luther King to struggle for civil rights — to believe that it was possible, because the spirit of man could develop and progress to an even greater degree. It was that faith in progress, that belief in hope, which led him to have a dream.

Idealist understandings also offer us what William James called "moral holidays." James spoke of just such idealist understandings, noting that all of us are caught up in the uncertainty of what will happen in our futures and in the future of the world — something about which we all care intensely — and that this can lead to anxiety. We are caught, as it were, as boxers fighting against an evil foe, unable ever to relax. The belief in progress and in hope, inspired by idealism, allows us to occasionally say: yes, it will work out; I will take

a moral holiday for the afternoon. I can relax my muscles a bit. I can cease to be strenuous for a time and enjoy some of my life, because I do have a belief that things will work out in the wash. Idealism is therefore not only a spur to action but also a reason to occasionally release from action and enjoy some measure of calm.

Finally, historical idealism has supplied many people with the courage and the determination to persevere through the most difficult of times — people faced with the most hideous of discriminations who believed that nonetheless historical progress is inevitable, who ceased to become bitter, who failed to become angry and violent, and who instead persevered. That failure to become bitter, angry, and violent may well have led to their success. Mahatma Gandhi, no matter how many times thrown into prison, no matter how many times told by the British that his plan would never work, stuck by his guns and refused to become disillusioned. The fact is that, despite overwhelming odds, he did win. That very success speaks to the strength and brilliance of idealism, speaks to its perennial appeal, and to the reason we can hardly think to dispense with it or give over to the pessimism and small-minded naturalism of the materialists.

The Case for Naturalism

That is my idealist rap. Now I am free to pursue the other course. It is true that idealism is a very inspiring belief and that it gives us faith to go on, but it comes at a cost. Everything comes at a cost. The cost of idealism is that it requires you to sacrifice your scientific conscience. You can believe in the freedom of the spirit only if you are willing to accept things that go bump in the dark. How much do minds weigh? Where do you find concepts? What color are ideas? Why not just believe in ghosts in the machine? In fact, is idealism not a belief that there is a ghost in the machine — that human history is not the story of humans, but of that ghost in the machine?

What naturalism offers you is a preservation of your scientific conscience, a preservation of your scientific heritage: intellectual conscience. It explains human behavior in a law-like fashion — as if, strangely enough, you were animals. And in fact, if you have ever been to a vivisection, we do seem to look like animals. We do seem to have hearts and brains and neural structures very similar to those of other animals. And if we accept Darwin's thesis, we do seem to have come from animals. At what moment exactly did we stop being animals? At what moment did we step outside of nature and become something other?

What naturalism insists — and it is not such an incredible notion — is that we are actually mammals, with extremely complex neural structures, extremely complex larynxes, extended memories, and the ability to communicate. That means that we naturalists are compelled to treat culture and language instrumentally and behaviorally, which is always considered reductive by the idealists. But consider: how many of you have watched a child learn? When you teach a child a word, do you explain the concept first? When you teach him to say "mama," do you say, "First I want to explain the concept of mama, Johnny — mama is in fact the genetic forebearer of your particular person, and mama bears you in the womb for nine months, so once you get the mama concept, then we will teach you the mama word"? Or do you teach the child "mama" behaviorally, the same way you teach a dog to heel? The child sees a certain range of colors, hears the sound "mama," and if he says it, he gets smiles and strokes. And if he does not, he keeps hearing "mama." And if he says "dada" when he sees the range of colors and experiences that we expect to elicit "mama," we say, "No, Johnny — mama." And then he gets the smile. He smiles because he copies it.

The idealist will tell us that this is because the child has achieved a conceptual understanding. That may or may not be. We also know

that smiling is a very complex muscular mechanism, and because it uses so many muscles it releases endorphins — so the child is actually experiencing pleasure when it learns and smiles. Maybe that is why it remembers. I have nephews, and I have watched them learn. They do not seem to be very good with concepts. But if you keep reinforcing them in saying certain words in certain contexts, they will get them right. For some reason, they can use a word in one context and misuse it in another. They watch a video, see monsters, and say "there are monsters." Then they go to the playground and say "I saw monsters." Is it that they are obsessed with the monster concept, or is it that they simply have not yet learned that you do not use that sound at the playground — only when you watch a video? What we naturalists would argue is that there may be some conceptual awareness going on in a child's head — it is possible — but there is certainly also the behavioral and instrumental training going on. And if I can explain all of his linguistic activity on those instrumental and behavioral terms, then why do we posit this extra ghost in the machine?

How do we treat, after the child has reached a certain stage, its use of language in an instrumental and naturalistic way? The suggestions have already been made. Do we not in fact believe in science not because it "explains," but because it allows us to dominate nature? If all of our scientific theories turned out to be incredibly impractical, and belief in ghosts actually worked better in controlling nature, I do not think many of us would subscribe to science. We would probably subscribe to a belief in ghosts. The fact of the matter is, we believe what has helped our species dominate its environment, bring in a greater food supply, and reproduce. One way of thinking of human culture is as though our brain is a sort of hardware and culture is a sort of software — and those programs which allow the hardware units to reproduce themselves most effectively win, just like any other animal. Culture is not something distinct from the rest of

nature, not a distinct metaphysical realm. It is the particular program, the codification of information, that this particular animal has. It is different in degree, not in kind.

Other animals communicate as well. Dogs exhibit submission to their leaders of the pack by rolling over on their stomachs. As a child I was guilty of idealism and thought it did it because it wanted to be scratched on its stomach. It does not: it is exposing itself to have its throat ripped out, and that expresses to the leader "you are my leader." Dogs lick your face, and I thought "that is a doggy kiss." It is not. When dogs are puppies, they feed by licking the face of their mother, and then the mother knows that means "provide dinner for the pup." A dog licks your hand because it wants salt. Now, those are very complicated behaviors, and they seem to express emotions. I would urge that they do express emotions, and that human emotions are of the same kind. We are not categorically different from other animals. Most other primates and higher herd mammals have emotions of some sort. It is not a supernatural or extra-physical phenomenon; it is an extremely physical phenomenon. If we were to do a brain scan, we would undoubtedly find a release of endorphins and various other chemicals in the brain. Neurology is a primitive science at this point, but the naturalist must hold that it will be the key to understanding human psychology and the so-called mind — that mind is in fact a mechanism, like any other mechanism found in the world, and that there is no separate realm out there existing nowhere in particular.

Naturalism also has this virtue: it is more likely to produce practical knowledge about what works under what circumstances. A naturalist interpretation of history — because it is law-like, because it does not insist that every event is a completely unique expression of the development of the spirit — says to us that, yes, when you have a recession and you raise taxes, you produce higher unemployment: it

happened this year, it happened that year, it happened again in another year — a law-like regularity. Idealism precludes that, because for idealism every situation is unique. At this particular moment, raising taxes in a recession might actually help produce a growth of human love and prosperity and greater economic activity. If we accept idealism at face value, we are enjoined never to learn anything practical from the past, never to learn what tactics worked at what moment, because the moment is always different — it is developing along different lines. It is precisely because naturalism rejects that premise that history can be more than just an edifying tale — a sort of secular sermon to make us feel good — and can in fact be a practical discipline from which we can actually learn. We tried absolutist moral arguments in the 1850s, and it produced the Civil War. Must we make the same mistake again, say, over the question of abortion rights? If we are naturalists, we can learn from the past. We can say: we know what happened when we did that once before, and it led to a bloodbath. Perhaps we can learn from that example again.

It is only fair to point out that naturalism offers us no special grounds for hope and no ultimate meaning for the past. It is true that naturalism may not relieve the terror of history — it may, in fact, lead to world-weariness, as the *Iliad* suggests. But from a naturalistic perspective, what that really means is that we find idealism preferable because it offers us a cultural narcotic — because it anesthetizes us to the harsh realities of the world, because it deadens our awareness of the difficulties that humans face in our life in the food chain. If those are the grounds for preferring one intellectual construction over another, they are pretty thin grounds. One might say the same thing about the preference for creationism over evolutionism — and in fact one does say the same thing. It is deflationary, after all, to believe that you are a monkey's nephew.

There is something a little less special about being a slightly less furry biped than, say, a chimpanzee.

But let us ask a further question: is that narcotic always good? We know that people can take too many narcotics and deaden their brains to the point where they can no longer judge what they are doing. What has killed more people in this century? What has filled more mass graves, more body bags, than a belief in idealism? One of the things I found perfectly clarifying about the Persian Gulf War, for example, was that we were fighting it over a very prosaic principle: the free flow of oil at market prices — keeping the price of gas down. A lot of people think that is callous, but that is because they are not naturalists. The naturalist says: that is perfectly reasonable, because you are not going to kill ten million people to keep the price of gas down. After a quarter of a million, you will stop. But for freedom? How many would you kill for freedom? How many people would you mass murder for democracy or social equality? Stalin thought twenty million was a fine number. And I do not think he was callous and cynical — I think he genuinely believed he was fighting for humanity. And I will tell you what is scarier: I think Hitler did too. That is what idealism can lead to. When you are that narcoticized, you do not notice that you are washing your hands in blood. We have had more historical mass murder in this century than at any point before it, and more hatred and murder on this planet since the development of historical idealism — more from Westerners, or people trained in the Western intellectual tradition, than at any time previously. Perhaps this narcotic is not such a good thing. Perhaps naturalism, and the detoxification it offers, might be just the ticket.

To sum up on naturalism: we naturalists are rugged folk. We teach a sort of tough love — a tough love that sobers you up and deflates your highest expectations of yourself. But it does so in the belief that perhaps, after all, hope is not a virtue but the last refuge of a

scoundrel — of a person who is unwilling to accommodate their behaviors and their emotional proclivities to the realities of the world, which is what we mean by being an adult. By deflating our hopes, we are really deflating our infantile wishes and teaching ourselves that we cannot expect the world to live up to our subjectivities. We must take our subjectivities and train them to accept the realities that surround us.

The Value of Historical Knowledge

So much for the naturalistic case. I want now to say that whichever view you take — and I do believe that they are essentially contestable views, and I do not believe you can make a conclusive case for either one; I think they are each equally tenable, and it is really a question of what each particular person needs and wants — either way, one cannot help but feel that there is a fundamental value to historical knowledge, whether you are an idealist, a naturalist, a skeptic, or anything else.

Certainly, everyone must agree that if anything teaches us the causes of how things have come to be the way they are today, it is history. If understanding ourselves means understanding how we became what we are, then certainly the only way to get that is history. And we find that not only for societies and nations and civilizations, but as individuals. When we try to understand why we are the sort of person we are, we think about the things that have happened to us — and that is history. In fact, the historical method underlies and is used in all diagnosis, not only psychological but medical. Think about what you tell a doctor when he asks about your symptoms: what have you eaten lately? What have you been doing? Your neck hurts — have you been straining it? Have you been walking around on a lectern giving lectures, spinning your head back and forth? These are historical questions. The historical method underlies all parts of diagnosis — not just medical, not just psychological, but practical as

well. You are having a problem with your children? What has been happening? Tell me about it.

History is an indispensable part of everyday life. That is part of its value. It reveals to us the accumulated actions of our species, and if that does not afford us self-knowledge, then I think we have to conclude that self-knowledge is impossible. If we cannot learn who we are from what our ancestors have done, then we can never know who we are. And if history cannot help us understand the world we are in, then we are truly lost. If there is a better way of understanding what is going on in Yugoslavia today than through a history of that region for the last 700 years, we do not know what it is. Certainly history is the only hope we have for understanding the world around us. And if we are to have a sense of the options facing us in terms of action and behavior, that must come from an understanding of the nature of what exists. I do not see how we could even hope to act without an awareness of the past. As one scholar put it: he who forgets the lessons of history is forever condemned to repeat them — to relive them. He who forgets the mistakes made in the past will make them over and over again.

Conclusion

Whether one of the aforementioned perspectives will at some point in our future come to dominate at the expense of the other is a question we cannot be indifferent to. We characterize ourselves — we define ourselves — not only on the basis of our past but on the basis of the way we think about that past. If we think of ourselves as the result of a particular biological evolution that has developed various techniques, we have less of a reason to treasure those beliefs; we have a much more tenuous sense of our identities in cultural terms, though perhaps stronger in other terms. Similarly, for idealists, if we believe that our thoughts are the result of a process of dialectical unfolding of a set of fundamental principles and ideals, we

are likely to hold on to those and cherish them far more than we otherwise would.

We cannot be indifferent to the past or to the various interpretations of the past. Perhaps nothing tells us so much about not only who we are but who we want to be as the different strategies of interpreting the past and the different pasts. Finally, I want to say, in accord with my own practice as a historian: whether our culture will become idealist or naturalist is something we can only know in the future — it will only be a subject for future historians. I conclude with my paraphrase from Hegel: the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the setting of dusk. This is a decision which each of us must make for ourselves.

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Epilogue: The Never-Ending Search for a Meaningful Past

Every generation inherits the same past, yet no generation understands it in quite the same way.

This simple observation captures both the ambition and the humility of *The Search for a Meaningful Past*. Over sixteen lectures, we have traveled across more than two centuries of philosophical reflection, historical methodology, sociology, anthropology, literary theory, and the philosophy of science. Along the way, we encountered some of the greatest minds ever to contemplate not merely *what happened*, but *what history itself is*. We have asked whether history possesses laws, whether it follows a discernible direction, whether it is driven by ideas or by material forces, whether it can ever be objective, and whether the very act of writing history inevitably transforms the past into narrative.

The remarkable conclusion is that no single answer has prevailed.

Yet this is not a failure.

It is, rather, the defining characteristic of historical understanding itself.

History refuses to become simple because human existence refuses to become simple.

At the outset of the course, Professor Darren Staloff challenged what many people unconsciously assume: that history is merely the accumulation of facts. Facts certainly matter. Without evidence there can be no responsible history. But facts alone never explain

themselves. Every historical fact becomes meaningful only when placed within a larger framework of interpretation. The selection of evidence, the identification of causes, the distinction between what is significant and what is incidental, even the boundaries of an historical event, all depend upon prior assumptions about how history works.

This insight has echoed throughout every lecture.

Mircea Eliade reminded us that our modern conception of linear historical time is not universal. Entire civilizations viewed history not as an irreversible sequence of unique events but as recurring cycles that renewed the primordial order through ritual. What we regard as progress, novelty, and historical development would have appeared strange, perhaps even dangerous, to many traditional societies. Our historical consciousness, therefore, is itself a historical product.

Giambattista Vico then inaugurated one of the great Enlightenment projects: the hope that history might possess discoverable laws. Unlike nature, history is made by human beings, and therefore, he argued, humanity ought to be capable of understanding its own creations. This optimism would become one of the central aspirations of modern historical thought.

Kant transformed that optimism into the idea of progress. Individual lives may appear chaotic and accidental, but the species advances. Human freedom expands. Institutions mature. Reason gradually becomes embodied within civilization. History, in this view, possesses a destination, even if the travelers themselves seldom recognize it.

Hegel elevated this vision into perhaps the most ambitious philosophy of history ever written. Every epoch becomes a necessary stage in the unfolding of Spirit. Every conflict contributes to freedom's gradual realization. Contradictions are not failures but engines of development. Even suffering acquires philosophical significance within the larger dialectic of universal history.

Marx accepted Hegel's dynamic vision while reversing its foundations. Ideas no longer moved history. Material conditions did. The struggle between classes replaced the evolution of Spirit as the driving force behind historical change. History became a science of production, economics, and revolution. Few historical theories have exercised greater practical influence upon the modern world.

Then came Nietzsche, whose skepticism shattered the confidence of the nineteenth century. He questioned not merely historical conclusions but historical consciousness itself. Can an excessive concern with the past weaken life? Can memory become a burden rather than a liberation? Does scholarship sometimes preserve what ought instead to be overcome? Nietzsche forced historians to confront an uncomfortable possibility: history exists for life, not life for history.

Max Weber introduced yet another perspective. Society cannot be reduced to economics alone. Power, legitimacy, bureaucracy, religion, and culture each shape historical development in distinct ways. Weber's subtle comparative sociology replaced sweeping universal laws with carefully constructed analytical categories, demonstrating that explanation often requires complexity rather than simplicity.

The twentieth century broadened the conversation still further.

Toynbee expanded the scale from nations to civilizations.

Collingwood argued that history is ultimately the recovery of thought itself.

Hempel sought scientific rigor through general explanatory laws.

Danto revealed the indispensable role of narrative.

Braudel redirected attention from dramatic events toward the slow rhythms of geography, economy, and social structure.

Hayden White questioned whether historical writing could ever escape its literary character.

McNeill reminded us that microbes, ecology, and biology have shaped human destiny no less profoundly than kings, revolutions, or philosophies.

By the final lecture, we no longer possessed a single philosophy of history.

Instead, we possessed something considerably more valuable.

We possessed a philosophical awareness of the extraordinary diversity of historical explanation.

Perhaps that is the deepest lesson of the course.

Every major theory illuminates some dimensions of reality while obscuring others.

Economic explanations reveal patterns invisible to intellectual history.

Intellectual history uncovers motives hidden from economic reductionism.

Social history reveals structures beneath political events.

Narrative theory explains why historical meaning depends upon retrospective interpretation.

Naturalistic history reminds us that humanity never acts independently of biology and environment.

Religious history exposes questions of meaning neglected by secular explanation.

None is sufficient by itself.

Together, however, they reveal the astonishing richness of the historical enterprise.

This plurality should not discourage us.

Quite the contrary.

One of the persistent temptations of modern intellectual life is the search for a master key capable of unlocking every historical problem. We long for elegant theories that reduce immense complexity to a handful of principles. Such theories possess undeniable beauty. They satisfy our desire for order.

History, however, consistently resists reduction.

Human beings are simultaneously biological organisms, economic actors, political citizens, moral agents, religious seekers, linguistic creatures, cultural participants, and imaginative storytellers. A theory capable of explaining one of these dimensions may leave the others untouched. The search for a meaningful past therefore requires intellectual flexibility rather than ideological certainty.

Another lesson emerges equally forcefully.

History is never merely about the past.

Throughout these lectures, we repeatedly discovered that every philosophy of history reflects the concerns of its own age. Enlightenment thinkers sought progress because they believed in reason. Nineteenth-century philosophers searched for universal laws because science appeared capable of revealing them. Twentieth-century theorists questioned narrative because language itself became philosophically problematic. Each generation rewrites history not because the past changes, but because the questions asked of the past continually evolve.

This observation should not lead us into cynicism.

Historical knowledge is neither impossible nor arbitrary.

Evidence still constrains interpretation.

Documents still possess meaning.

Facts remain stubborn realities.

Yet our understanding grows precisely because each generation discovers new perspectives from which to examine familiar evidence. Historical inquiry advances not by approaching a final, complete explanation but by continually expanding the range of meaningful questions.

In that sense, history resembles philosophy itself.

Neither discipline reaches definitive conclusions that permanently end discussion.

Instead, each deepens our understanding by refining the questions we ask.

This realization also transforms the role of the historian.

The historian is not merely a collector of facts nor a passive recorder of events. The historian becomes an interpreter, a translator between worlds separated by time. Historical scholarship requires imagination disciplined by evidence, empathy constrained by criticism, and interpretation grounded in documentation. The historian must reconstruct minds unlike our own without projecting our assumptions onto them. Few intellectual tasks demand greater humility.

Yet the course also leaves many questions deliberately unresolved.

Can objective history ever exist?

Is historical progress real or illusory?

Are civilizations governed by discoverable patterns or unique contingencies?

Does freedom shape history, or does history shape freedom?

Can historical explanation ever become genuinely scientific?

To what extent are historical narratives literary constructions?

How should moral judgment be applied to past societies whose values differ radically from our own?

And perhaps the deepest question of all:

Does history itself possess meaning, or is meaning something human beings continually create as they attempt to understand their own existence?

These questions remain open because they must remain open.

Every generation inherits them anew.

Our own century introduces additional challenges scarcely imagined by many of the thinkers examined here. Artificial intelligence, digital archives, computational history, climate change, globalization, genetic research, and planetary-scale environmental transformation are reshaping both the substance of history and the methods by which historians investigate it. Vast quantities of historical evidence are now searchable in seconds. Quantitative analysis uncovers patterns invisible to previous generations. At the same time, misinformation, ideological polarization, and competing collective memories make the responsible interpretation of history more essential than ever.

The philosophy of history, therefore, is not a completed discipline.

It is entering another chapter.

Future historians will undoubtedly formulate new theories capable of integrating biological evolution, environmental systems, network analysis, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence into historical interpretation. Whether these efforts produce a new grand synthesis or merely enrich our existing plurality remains impossible to predict.

Perhaps that uncertainty is precisely as it should be.

The search for a meaningful past has never truly been about reaching the final answer.

It has always been about learning how to ask better questions.

History is humanity's conversation with itself across generations.

Every civilization adds its voice.

Every historian contributes another interpretation.

Every reader becomes another participant in that dialogue.

We cannot change the past.

We cannot revisit it.

We cannot observe it directly.

But through careful inquiry, disciplined imagination, and philosophical reflection, we may continue to understand it more deeply than those who came before us.

And in doing so, we also come to understand ourselves.

For ultimately, history is not only the study of what humanity has been.

It is the ongoing exploration of what humanity is, and what it might yet become.

The search for a meaningful past, then, is never merely about yesterday.

It is one of the indispensable ways by which we prepare ourselves to face tomorrow.